Featuring a new foreword by Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster

GÉNÉRAL
BERNARD BARRERA

OPÉRATION SERVAL

A MEMOIR OF WAR

MALI 2013

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Operation Serval
War Notes, Mali 2013

Général Bernard Barrera
Translated by John di Rico

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This book is dedicated to

Marcel Pieuchot, infantryman from the 2nd Battalion of Chasseurs, killed in Bieuxy (Aisne region of France) on August 20, 1918.

Albert Compain, Chief Corporal from the 21st Colonial Inf Rgt, killed in Langson (Tonkin) on December 22, 1946.

Yoann Marcillan, Chief Brigadier from the 40th Arty Rgt, killed in Kapisa (Afghanistan) on June 9, 2012.

To the men of the Serval Brigade, who died for France under my command:

Harold Vormezeele, Staff Sergeant from the 2nd Foreign Legion Para Rgt, killed on February 19, 2013.

Cédric Charenton, Corporal from the 1st PCR, killed on March 2, 2013

Wilfried Pingaud, Chief Brigadier from the 68th Afr Arty Rgt, killed on March 6, 2013.

Alexandre Van Dooren, Corporal from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt, killed on March 16, 2013.

To their fellow soldiers from other units who died for France during the operation

To our Malian and Chadian brothers in arms, who fell at our side during the liberation of the country

To our soldiers who died on expeditionary operations

To our wounded

To their grieving families

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Foreword—Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster

What battles have in common is human.
–John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*

I met Général de division Bernard Barrera in July 2015. As part of my responsibilities to design the future US Army, I thought it essential to study recent conflicts, understand the missions that soldiers and units may be called upon to execute, the capabilities that the future force will require, concepts for fighting, and the associated priorities for training and education. I asked General Barrera to join a historical lessons learned seminar at Johns Hopkins University to speak about his and his unit's experience during the Operation Serval, the French intervention in Mali from 2013-2014.

General Barrera had just published his *Opération Serval: Notes de Guerre*. His compelling and insightful presentation exceeded all expectations. He highlighted the essential elements of combat readiness and combat effectiveness. In my thank you letter, I noted that the lessons of the campaign "are of great value to the US Army" and urged General Barrera to pursue "an English translation of your book." Thanks to the Army University Press, that aspiration is now a reality.

Operation Serval is to be read and discussed—especially by officers and sergeants responsible for preparing soldiers for war and leading them into battle. At a time when contemplation of future war focuses predominantly on the interactions of new weapons such as missiles and drones with air defenses and counter-drone capabilities, General Barrera reminds us of continuities in battle associated with the human dimension of war. And, although the author's humility precludes him from engaging in self-laudatory prose, *Operation Serval* provides a stellar example of how to prepare for combat, build cohesive teams, lead in battle, seize the initiative, and defeat the enemy while maintaining highest standards of ethical conduct.

Barrera trained and prepared his soldiers and himself for the crucible of battle. He inspired his troops with compassionate leadership, fighting to get them the facilities and support they deserved. He also challenged his soldiers, recognizing that sweat expended in tough training reduces blood spilled after the shooting begins. Barrera studied history to ready himself and his unit for combat.

In contrast to some commanders who are most comfortable surrounded by large digital screens in a command post, Barrera led from the front.

There he accessed the information he needed, took in the sights, sounds, and smells of the battlefield, and looked his soldiers and leaders in the eye to gauge their frames of mind and readiness for the mission. Barrera practiced what the US Army calls mission command, giving subordinate commanders wide latitude for the employment of their forces under an overall concept of operation.

There are many tactical, operational, and logistical lessons in these pages, but two stood out to this reader: the importance of combined arms (i.e. the integration of aviation, fires, mobile protected firepower, and infantry) and the priority Barrera placed on seizing and exploiting the initiative. He understands that the riskiest course of action is not to take risk. After learning all he could about the situation, Barrera and his commanders pursued the enemy into the shadows of uncertainty. But Barrera also understood the difference between accepting risk and gambling. When necessary, he took time to marshal the strength necessary to overmatch the enemy.

Leaders should take note of how Barrera prepared his soldiers for the moral and psychological strains of combat. Some argue that fighting unscrupulous terrorists justifies a relaxation of the standards of ethical conduct in war. Despite facing heinous enemy behavior such as the murder of civilians and the use of child soldiers, French soldiers maintained their high standards of conduct, applying firepower with discipline and discrimination. Ethical conduct in war is important to mission accomplishment as well as helping soldiers cope with difficult memories knowing that they upheld their principles. Barrera did now allow rage to become a combat motivator. His soldiers grieved the loss of their fallen comrades, then rededicated themselves to honoring their memory with their deeds in pursuit of an outcome worthy of those sacrifices.

At the time of this writing, many in the US defense establishment are arguing the that the US Joint Force should focus almost exclusively on preparing for the "pacing threat" of the Peoples Republic of China and its Peoples Liberation Army. But American leaders' record of predicting the demands of future war is poor. And despite the desire to leave the wars against terrorist organizations in the past, those organizations are gaining strength from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Sahel. The 2025 Global Terrorism Index reported that the Sahel region (which contains Mali) accounted for over *half* of all global terrorism deaths. The region remains a focal point of political instability and violence, as well as growing Russian and Chinese influence. The story of the Serval Brigade highlights the importance of consolidating military gains into sustainable political

outcomes and the need for US and allied military forces to be prepared for rapid deployment into unanticipated, austere environments and immediate transition into reconnaissance and offensive operations against brutal and determined enemies.

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, US Army, Retired
Author of *Dereliction of Duty*, *Battlegrounds*,
and *At War with Ourselves*.
Stanford, California

Foreword—Général Henri Bentégeat

General Barrera knows what he is talking about. In Northern Mali, he won one of the toughest battles the French army has had to fight since the end of the Algerian War.

His book is void of pretense and embellishment. You can tell that his story is genuine. Setting aside all vainglory, he tells the story of an adventure in the language of a soldier, an adventure that a soldier prepares for without necessarily expecting it to unfold. When it does, he recounts three months of incessant fighting against a fanatical and well-armed adversary, a hellish and exhilarating whirlwind, crushed by heat and fatigue, and punctuated by death, injury, and disease.

Everything is there, tactics and technique, doubts when the "fog of war" envelopes the theater of operations, questions when the decrepit equipment can no longer keep up with the hectic pace of maneuvers, and above all the emotion that stirs up images of the past, his personal and family history with the military.

Strong convictions are expressed in the exclusive service of the mission which must be accomplished without concessions, but not at all costs. Because human beings are omnipresent in the choices and decisions of the general commanding the ground forces of Operation Serval. He holds himself accountable for the lives of his subordinates and to their families who anxiously scrutinize the media in France, but he is also concerned about the liberated populations caught in the crossfire of battle, works to support his Malian and Chadian allies, strives to spare and take in the unfortunate child soldiers recruited by the jihadists.

Without hatred or qualms toward a ruthless adversary that does not respect international conventions, he demands that the actions of his troops remain above reproach. When they are killed in action in this distant African land, he experiences their death as a personal tragedy, a sacrifice for France and the liberation of a people taken hostage by modern-day barbarians.

This simple story, filled with the faces of unknown heroes whom he draws into the light, is a tremendous tribute to those who have written this page of military glory and, beyond that, to our armies whose competence, courage, and self-sacrifice are now recognized throughout the world.

May it reassure our compatriots in the conviction that their security is in good hands and that the financial efforts that are required of them, mod-

est in view of the stakes and overall public spending, are the price to pay for peace and the freedoms we enjoy, and for France to retain the means to influence its destiny.

Général Henri Bentégeat

Preface

Saturday, February 23, 2013

Gao (Niger bend)

A few yards from the hangar where I set up my command post, the surgeons from the field hospital are operating non-stop. Yesterday, our Chadian allies attacked the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)1* positions in the Adrar des Ifoghas. They bravely broke through the front lines of the eastern entrance to Ametettai, but they paid a heavy price: 26 killed and 70 wounded.

The day before yesterday, infantrymen from the 92nd infantry regiment surrounded and killed 20 jihadists who had infiltrated Gao. Some of them were rigged with explosive belts and planned to die as suicide bombers. Fortunately, they were stopped a few yards from our positions.

We are now in position and ready. Paris asks me to attack as soon as possible, to seize the Adrar massif. It's time for battle. It's also time for responsibility. In one month, we liberated Timbuktu and Southern Mali. Our armored raids reached the Algerian and Nigerien borders, surprising cornered terrorists who thought they were invincible. They are now attacking us in the city, trying to regain the initiative. Three hundred miles further north, they are holed up in the scorching hot valleys of the Adrar, their sanctuary. No one has seen them since. The "fog of war" is slowly, very slowly, starting to clear. We must push ahead and destroy them.

I look up. My staff remain silent. There are less than a hundred of them drafting plans and leading the operations of the four battalions, a ground force of 4,000 men, in close liaison with the small paratrooper command post (CP) in Tessalit commanded by Xavier, my deputy commander for Northern Mali. In this overheated hangar, everyone is at their post. They trust me and that trust is mutual. We know each other well. We're a strong, united group, but we don't know what lies ahead. Everyone is looking from one to another. In the end, they're all looking at me. Yesterday, the Chadian forces suffered 26 casualties and 70 wounded in battle. This time it will be our turn.

I am surrounded by my main subordinates: Denis, my deputy commander for Southern Mali, Claude, my chief of staff, the officers in charge of operations, intelligence, support, communications, and logistics. In the small room, a map of Mali shows the units spread out between Timbuktu and Gao in the South, Kidal, Aguelhok, and Tessalit. We all come to the same conclusion. The enemy has just been unmasked. We now have to go and find them while leav-

*A glossary is provided at the end of the book.

ing enough forces behind to seek out and destroy the katibas of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) in the "Greater Gao" region.

My officers are all around me. The decision is made, in accordance with doctrine, common sense, and our study of the enemy: I will head to Tessalit for an unknown duration. In our army, the place for leaders is in front, to get a sense of terrain, to be among their men, to better apprehend the situation, and to seize opportunities as they arise. Xavier is waiting for me "up there." Grégoire, who is in charge of the operation from Bamako, has given me the green light. Claude has already chosen the men who will leave with me tomorrow to reinforce our CP in the North. Satellite assets have been pre-positioned.

The thermometer reads 113 °F. I give my recommendations to all those who will stay in Gao: speed, audacity, and surprise. We have to get ahead of the enemy, jostle and drive them into the bottoms of the valleys in the North and the wadis* in the South. It will take intuition, of course, and making decisions won't be easy. Our combat exercises will prove valuable, as we will be far from our bases, facing extreme conditions, with death lurking in ambush. We know that all of France is behind us. Defeat is not an option, and we will leave nothing to chance to protect the lives of our men. They are experienced soldiers, motivated, united, and brave, but each one has a proud family waiting for them back home with fear in their stomachs. We know that not all of them will return.

One last round of discussions and the meeting is over. The orders will be drawn up. I go to tell the CP I'm leaving for the Adrar, pack my bag, spend one last night in Gao, and greet my Gauls from the 92nd. Heavy fighting awaits them, too.

Everything is moving fast, very fast in this campaign. Captain Rémi, my military assistant, comes to get me for the final briefing. I grab my beret and notebook. On my way out, I point to the only object on my small table next to the computer, a small metal statue, and I tell him what he already knows, "Rémi, tomorrow don't forget to put the Victory of Constantine in my satchel!" The Victory of Constantine, protector of the Roman armies, was the symbol chosen by General de Monsabert 70 years ago, on the eve of the battles in Italy and the liberation of Provence. It has ever since remained the symbol of the 3rd Brigade and, by extension, that of this entire Serval Brigade which will now engage in combat.

Tomorrow, the Victory statuette will leave for Tessalit, too.

Part 1

Preparing for Guepard Alert*

August 2011 – January 2013

Arrival in Clermont-Ferrand

Commanding a brigade of 5,000 men

The command post of the 3rd Mechanized Brigade left Limoges for its new home in the old black volcanic stone building, located on the Cours Sablon in the center of town. Steeped in history, before 1914 this building was home to the Artillery School of the army corps based in Auvergne. The building has been refurbished. It is functional and the 80 commanders and staff members, the command and control element of this 5,000 strong ground brigade, are finally settling into their new offices. August vacation is over. Activities have resumed in Clermont and for the 3rd's five regiments. I have just been assigned to the building, with my new brigadier general rank—two stars, effective August 1st. There will be no special ceremony this morning. There is no formal event when a brigadier general takes up his command, unlike that of a captain when he is put in charge of a company (150 men) or later of a colonel for a regiment (1,000 men). The general commands his colonels from a CP. He is assisted by an "old" colonel and a small command staff of three people. In Clermont-Ferrand, he shares the building with the staff, headed by an experienced colonel who has already commanded a regiment. The division of roles is clear. The general commands his chief of staff who prepares, drafts, and proposes orders and directives, and his five colonels, also known as regimental commanders, who in turn command their regiment through their five or six captains.

It's 8 am when I walk between the gate's two black pillars and am greeted by my executive officer Hubert, who is none other than a good friend of mine from Saint-Cyr, and the chief of staff, Colonel Minjoulat-Rey, whom I will call Claude, a calm and trustworthy infantry officer. The welcome from the staff and my inner circle is genuine and frank. The men and women gather in silence in front of the building to raise the flag.

The atmosphere is good and, at a glance, I discover a close-knit and experienced team. Most of them were in Kapisa (Afghanistan) the year before under the orders of my predecessor, General Pierre Chavancy. All of

them have several expeditionary operations under their belts. All of them are keen to maintain a balance between their professional life and their personal and family life. They are above all citizens who have chosen to serve their country in an army that has become their second family.

As he will do every Friday morning for the next two years, Claude calls his staff to attention, does an about-face, and salutes me as he invites me to "review the troops." I didn't prepare a speech. The words are those of a newcomer, happy and proud to take on this two-year command, words dictated by reason, drawn from experience, and straight from the heart.

The Africans' Brigade

Claude and I salute our flag as it is hoisted by two corporals. We sing La Marseillaise*, followed by the Chant des Africains, the anthem of France's Army of Africa and particularly of the 3rd Algerian Infantry Division of 1943-1945, of which the 3rd Brigade is a direct descendant. Created in 1943 in Algeria, the 3rd was composed of mainland Frenchmen, Pieds-Noirs*, Algerians, and Tunisians, men united under the French flag, fighting together for freedom. The general staff preserves and nurtures this historical connection, which represents a glorious and unsung part of our history. Two of the five regiments belonged to the Army of Africa. They all have their own traditions, their own history, but they all belong to the 3rd, the tri-crescent brigade, as depicted on the cloth badge that the Africans have been wearing on their left shoulder since 1943. Another useless symbol, one might think. Hardly! The military places great importance in the history of our units and the exploits of our veterans. We draw our pride and uniqueness from this history. This culture of traditions brings people together around a shared esprit de corps or morale, creating an invisible bond. All commanders and soldiers wear the cloth badge of their brigades and the metal insignia of their regiments.

A combined arms brigade

In the 3rd, everyone is an "African," but we distinguish ourselves from one another by each regiment's name, which refers to where they are stationed and is used for operations. A brigade is above all a coherent whole, a toolbox containing the main components needed to wage a ground war: two infantry regiments (Inf Rgt), an armored regiment, an artillery regiment (Arty Rgt), an engineer regiment (Eng Rgt), plus initial training schools for young recruits and specialized companies, including the Command and Supply Train Company (CSTC), attached to the general staff. In simple terms, the infantry is made up of infantrymen who

fight on foot in the city or in "open" terrain. Foot soldiers are equipped with wheeled armored vehicles. The Gauls from the 92nd Inf Rgt stationed in Clermont-Ferrand are well protected and equipped with modern, armored infantry fighting vehicles (AIFV) that have eight wheels and a 25mm chain gun. The Bisons from the 126th Inf Rgt stationed in Brive have the older, four-wheeled armored personnel carrier (APC) with a machine gun that will soon be phased out. Armored units fight in the AMX-10RC, a six-wheeled tank with a 105 mm howitzer, capable of conducting raids or supporting infantrymen with a powerful firing range of up to 1.2 miles. The armored regiment also has units called squadrons that specialize in intelligence gathering and reconnaissance, and are equipped with small, four-wheeled light armored vehicles (LAV). For the 3rd, the Porpoises from the marine infantry regiment stationed in Angoulême make up the armored units. The brigade's African artillerymen hail from the 68th African Artillery Regiment stationed in La Valbonne. They are equipped with 155mm Caesar howitzers that can fire up to 25 miles. These modern, precision weapons are mounted on a truck chassis. The 68th also has a battery (equivalent to a company or a squadron) specializing in surface-to-air missiles and another in tactical intelligence. This Brigade Intelligence Battery (BIB) is equipped with small vehicles and radio sensors, teams that liaise with local populations, and small drones that can see up to 6 miles ahead of the front lines. Finally, the African combat engineers from the 31st Engineer Regiment stationed in Castelsarrasin are there to "clear the way," to use their motto. They are our terrain specialists and essential for ground maneuvers. They clear mines, destroy obstacles, build bridges, and cross rivers. They include divers, deminers, and highly experienced specialists. All these Africans, also called Gauls, Bisons, Porpoises, African artillerymen and combat engineers, regularly meet for combat exercises at maneuver camps in Provence or in Champagne to train in their respective specialties or together for so-called combined arms exercises, where each of them has a role to play. Air-land combat is complex and linked to the terrain, the type of enemy, and the weather. The full scope of the system comes into focus when we add air support whose main task is to provide information and assist combat units with precision fire. Live fire exercises with army helicopters (Tiger or Gazelle) and air force or navy aircraft are rarer in mainland France, but commonplace in operations. Air support guidance is part of the training cycle for young officers. Specialized teams are constantly being formed and trained within the artillery regiment, so they can join the front lines at any time.

The 3rd, operations-oriented

Today, the French Army has eight brigades, known as combined arms brigades, all based on the same model and which can be deployed. They are not entirely identical. Schematically, there are two light brigades (the 11th Paratrooper and the 27th Mountain), four identical intermediate brigades, called mechanized infantry or light armored, and two slightly larger armored brigades that include Leclerc tanks and additional capabilities. The 3rd is in the intermediate category, as are the 1st, the 6th, and the 9th Brigades. They are deployed in turns, following a standard, two-year rotation: six months in operations in various theaters (Africa, the Middle East, and French Guiana), four months of individual training, four months of collective combat exercises for the regiments and six months on Guepard Alert, the army's quick reaction force (QRF), ready to deploy at a moment's notice. Operations like the Guepard QRF involve units, regiments, even the brigade, the general, and his staff. Everything depends on the current crises, the "operation order," which is constantly being updated based on political decisions and needs.

These eight combined arms brigades report to the Command Center for Ground Forces (CCGF), based in Lille. This command organizes and conducts training for units, allocates bases, ammunition, and means, and determines deployments for these eight brigades. It also commands three other smaller, specialized brigades which provide operational capabilities: the communications and command support brigade for liaison, the intelligence brigade for locating and identifying the enemy, and the special forces brigade. Each branch of the armed forces is responsible for training its members. Each level of command is responsible for validating subordinate levels, in other words, for ensuring that they are fit for operations. The general evaluates and qualifies—or not—his colonels and their regiments. The colonel qualifies his captains and their companies, squadrons, and batteries after months of constant combat readiness preparation and training. Once they deploy across the border, the formations fall under the orders of the General Staff of the Armies (GSOA), the French equivalent of the Joint Staff in the United States. Operations are permanently controlled by a CP buried in the heart of the Parisian military headquarters—the strategic Operations Command and Control Center (OCCC)—that maintains an overall view of the capabilities and missions of deployed units. This strategic level is directly under the command of the chief of staff of the armies (CSAS). This is the American equivalent of the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. The CSAS relies on operational commands for each theater, or region within an operation, where ground forces—generally one or more brigades—as well as

air, sea, and special forces are located. This decoupling between preparing and deploying forces is the result of decades of experience and works particularly well for France. Feedback from operations is used to continuously improve doctrine, training, formations, and equipment based on available resources. These are the same officers who deploy on operations and command units in the field or prepare orders at the OCCC, depending on their course of study. Mixing servicemen from the different branches of the military facilitates mutual understanding.

Coming back to the ground forces, just like regiments and companies, brigades change leaders every two years. These are intense command roles, the highlights of an officer's career. The level of responsibility is demanding and nothing can be overlooked: the men, their training, their career, their morale, their indispensable and expensive equipment, combat exercises, and an expeditionary operation every two years. The selection process is rigorous and based on annual evaluations. An important aspect of our military is that you have to have climbed all the ranks to take on higher responsibilities. Like all the other ground force brigadier generals, I alternated between troop time, military schooling, and general staff time before being put in command. In short, I was not born a general. I entered a military college at the age of 16, and had a classic career: at 20, I entered the French military academy Saint-Cyr, the infantry specialization school, then I commanded a section of 30 men for three years before becoming the executive officer of a captain. Like most of my peers, I commanded a company of 150 men at the age of 29, then an infantry regiment at 42, the 16th Battalion of Chasseurs, and finally the 3rd Brigade at 49.

So I know what it's like to be a young lieutenant, a captain, or a colonel even though the times have changed. Indeed, military service is no longer mandatory like it was in my early years and the equipment available to regiments has become scarcer. I know my role and ask my subordinates to assume their role, mainly to command their men. In other words, to give them executable orders, and to explain to them the nature and purpose of the mission, but also to educate them, to monitor them closely, to help them reach their potential, and to love them in the noblest sense of the term. This job requires exemplary behavior, pragmatism, and a great deal of adaptability and humility.

The Winged Victory of Constantine

After three years in Paris, one studying at the Institute of Advanced Studies of National Defense and two years in the military cabinet of the prime minister, I return to my main vocation which is commanding ground

forces. The Africans' honest and smiling faces remind me of my previous stations. Not everything in the building has been set up yet: my office and the ceremonial hall are in disarray. Boxes have been stacked up by the movers in the center of the rooms. In the ceremonial hall, I discover amidst all the packed memories three objects for the office: a portrait of General de Monsabert with Marseilles in the background, a fabric pennant of the 3rd AID, and a Victory statuette, a copy of the one found in the ruins of Constantine, a symbol with the three crescents of the 3rd. I have a great deal of esteem for Monsabert. I have been following him for 30 years: my class at Saint-Cyr (1982-1985) was named after him. He created and led his division to victory in Tunisia, then Italy in 1943-1944 (Belvedere, Garigliano, and Siena), before liberating Marseilles at the same time Leclerc liberated Paris. He liberated Provence and defended Strasbourg. In 1945, the African division—known as the 3rd—ended the war in Germany. His pennant remains the most decorated of World War II. It is hard to ignore such a legacy. It therefore seemed natural that the 3rd be given the nickname "Monsabert Brigade," like the 2nd which has its nickname: the "Leclerc Brigade."

My driver Marie-Jo, a tall, dedicated, quick-witted Martinican has just put the Victory statuette on the mantelpiece and the two of us have just moved the old wooden desk to the back of the room with the portrait of our founding father hanging just behind it. A small brass plate shines on the base of the winged Victory: "The 3rd AID to its leader." Another plate screwed on one side of the desk and facing it says: "This desk belonged to General de Lattre de Tassigny 1940-1942." The weight of history and the reverence of our veterans. The office quickly found its decor for the next two years, the pennant of my company, that of the 16th Battalion of Chasseurs, some photos of Bosnia, Kosovo, Chad, and Ivory Coast. Outside, the sun is shining and illuminating the Puy de Dôme, the pointed volcano that dominates Clermont. I smile as I look at all these black stones. A few months earlier, the general in charge of human resources had asked me to submit my preferences for my future assignment. The 3rd was my first choice. Even though it had just returned from Afghanistan and had no plans to deploy for the period 2011-2013, unlike others I could have chosen, the 3rd is Monsabert. The 3rd is the Africans and Clermont-Ferrand, where I commanded my company 20 years ago and where I was chief of operations 15 years ago. The 3rd is based in a familiar land, a land of character that evokes an eternal France, that of the terribly endearing people of Auvergne. The 3rd was also scheduled to man the Guepard QRF in September 2012 for a period of six months. If the events are favorable and the gods shine upon us, we might hit the jackpot. For a soldier, beyond the

risk involved, answering the call of duty is a professional accomplishment, the purpose of our job. Of course, not all missions are equally interesting or dangerous. For all of us, an initial deployment, when opening a theater as we say, remains the most captivating of all, that of the unknown, of initiative, risk, movement, and cohesion.

After this first day on the job, it's time to go home and spend time with the family. As I leave the building, I notice a marble slab in a nook against a rock. It lists the names of 18 officers of the Clermont general staff, deported and shot in 1943.

The role of a brigadier general

Commanding a combined arms brigade consists of applying general directives to ensure our ground forces' operational readiness and adapting these directives based on the brigade's units and the scheduled rotations of its five regiments. The leader sets the course, objectives, and deadlines by allocating resources (combat exercise camps, ammunition, etc.) for the coming year. Based on the operation order, he also determines which regiments will deploy where: Afghanistan, Africa, Lebanon, Balkans, or overseas French territories, taking into account the history of recent deployments and the specificities of each regiment. All this work is meticulously prepared by his staff officers in liaison with the regiments. Planning requires anticipating one or two years out, and being capable of adapting to constant changes in the system or in deployments. Once orders are given, the general checks up on his regiments by visiting their bases and maneuver camps. This is an opportunity for him to better understand the difficulties and expectations of colonels, captains, and soldiers, and also to make sure that the directives are being followed and that objectives are achieved.

From the outset, I decided to tour the five regiments and the training center for young recruits in order to get to know the personality of each regiment, to meet the troops, and to see their living conditions and training infrastructure. I also traveled all over France and its different maneuver camps to see my Africans in the field, by day, by night, under the snow in Champagne, or the beating sun of Provence. Like all my fellow brigadier generals, I spent my weeks between the brigade CP, the firing ranges and maneuver camps, and my weekends fulfilling my duties as departmental military delegate, checking up on units, and spending time with my family. At this pace, the months go by quickly, especially with the countless human resources and delegation meetings: annual evaluations and working closely with other commanders to select and promote the best and decide who deserves to be punished.

A subtle and solid balance

The military world is not the same as the business world. The interests, concerns, and demands of subordinates are defended and relayed by their immediate superiors, whom are fully responsible for their men. At the same time, representatives from the different ranks (officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted service members), elected by their peers, offer a balanced point of view. With an indispensable and well-understood freedom to express themselves, unit leaders and representatives convey to colonels, in general, their satisfactions and misgivings orally or in writing, according to set procedures (report on morale or special reports). Brigadier generals do the same with their superiors. The leader's role is therefore to listen, to speak, to explain, to relay to maintain the balance, and to ensure that everyone has suitable living and working conditions, to remind subordinates about the call of duty but also to defend their interests. Commanding is more than just giving orders. It implies obtaining the support of subordinates, working together, and maintaining mutual trust which forms the bedrock of our forces.

In the icy windswept combat village of Sissonne, the young soldier feels the cold the same way his captain and his general feel it. In the rain at Larzac between two shots, sharing a canteen cup of coffee with a sniper and his lieutenant, his warrant officer, sums up the relationship of proximity and trust that unites men whose commitment can lead to death. The units' strength lies in the collective, in mutual support, in cohesion. This truth is experienced all the time in the face of danger, where many have been saved by the action of their neighbor or a nearby unit. When I arrived in Clermont, I organized a brigade march in the Puys mountain chain with a delegation from each of the five regiments. While touring the bivouac areas, I discovered my artillerymen from the 2nd Battery of the 68th stationed in La Valbonne grouped with the Bisons from the 126th stationed in Brive. I ask an infantry corporal why they are spending time together, even though I was fairly certain of what he would say. His answer was simple and poignant, a soldier's answer: "General, they saved our asses several times last year in Kapisa."

October 2011

Commanding is first and foremost a matter of men

I toured the bases, met with the command teams, and talked with representatives from the different ranks. In the five regiments, we raised the colors together and sang The Song of the Africans. Each time, I made a point of visiting the infrastructures, the rooms, and the sanitary facilities. I

walked among the soldiers, taking the time to look them in the eye before gathering them around me and talking to them directly, as I did with my 30 light infantrymen, 25 years ago. For someone outside of the military, it might seem theatrical, and yet it is a rare and privileged moment, shared between a leader and his men. The dress, the appearance, and the allure are enough to tell the troops' morale and determination to fight and stand their ground. Talking with them is paramount. Explaining, convincing if necessary, and giving meaning to action. Later, the group will be broken up, but everyone will retain the vision, objectives, limits, rules, priorities, and intentions of their leader. Commanding is first and foremost a matter of men. Giving orders is only the tip of the iceberg in this vast relationship, undoubtedly the easiest as the rest cannot be learned. It is understood and experienced on a daily basis.

The messages are simple: we train to fight a war, to win, not to participate. The brigade's motto is our objective: "Only one goal: victory." We must be worthy of our veterans and live up to our traditions as Africans of the 3rd, those specific to each regiment. I expect my Africans to be professional and exemplary. The good ones will be promoted and rewarded, the deviants will be punished. In any case, I want men and women who are smiling, happy to be alive, and proud to wear their uniform. I then address the officers, reminding them of their primary function: to command, train, educate, live with their men, and understand them to help them reach their full potential.

Most of the soldiers I reviewed were not even born when I was a young officer, but the role of a leader has been the same for centuries. We often say that a troop is the mirror image of its leader. Fifteen years after the end of conscription, the value of the units depends essentially on their leaders, especially since they have all been in the same theaters and therefore have the same operational experiences. During commando training, my conscripts made it their duty to finish before the American and German sections. In the face of adversity, Frenchmen are determined to be the best.

November 2011

From Afghanistan to the Guepard QRF

We are meeting with my staff in Clermont, to finalize the operational framework for the 3rd Brigade until 2013. The command center for ground forces in Lille has already determined the upcoming rotations: several deployments will empty the bases in early 2012 for missions lasting four to six months. The largest concerns the 92nd Inf Rgt, which will be sent to Afghanistan from May to November, attached to the 2nd Armored

Brigade. The 92nd will be engaged with the 16th Battalion of Chasseurs, two regiments I know well. The effort of my brigade will naturally go to the 92nd which will be engaged in the hardest theater, even though we have started to withdraw units and equipment. My next priority is our readiness for the Guepard QRF, which the 3rd will be responsible for from the end of September 2012 to the end of March 2013.

The system has evolved. This next generation Guepard QRF has just come into being. It concerns each of the eight brigades for a six-month rotation. I sense an understandable skepticism among some of my officers. A brigade has never been deployed as a quick reaction force. "The cheetah will remain in its den," we even used to say. What does it matter? We have no right not to be ready. The political winds seem to be blowing in the right direction, a few months after a presidential election. By intuition, common sense, or professional conscience, I take a gamble to set a course that is totally different from what we have been used to doing for several years. It's a choice, a deduction that I explain to my officers. The brigades all went to Afghanistan, in the mountainous province of Kapisa, a small, rugged region with booby-trapped roads. Having visited three times, I could see the courage of the men and how difficult it was for the units to maneuver. The CPs are fixed and set up on well-appointed bases in Nijrab and Tagab. For two years, as a member of the prime minister's military cabinet, I followed the operations, the skirmishes, and the losses in Afghanistan, but also the hostage taking, the operations in Africa, the instability in the Sahel, and the Syrian crisis. Of one thing I was certain: the next expeditionary operation will be the opposite of Afghanistan. It will begin with an initial deployment in an unprepared region, large-scale movements, offensive combat, terrorist attacks, most likely the maintenance of air superiority, and the risk of a chemical threat that should not be overlooked.

A gamble: prepare for offensive battle in wide open spaces

I explain these deductions to the general staff and what it implies for training and commanding our troops: they need to relearn how to regularly maneuver command posts, to restore subsidiarity to the colonels and captains. My officers agree. Paradoxically, during the Cold War, brigade and division CPs, although less computerized and less fragile, used to change position every six to eight hours to avoid Soviet artillery fire and bombers. Open field exercises were conducted annually in the East and in Germany. We have outgrown our habits. The units, which are under pressure from the needs of expeditionary operations, are naturally prepared for their rotations and the increasingly limited resources and vehicles that await them.

Budgetary restrictions have led to the build-up of equipment reserves for the ground forces at the expense of the regiments. Units have only a fraction of their equipment left and they spend valuable time collecting and reintegrating what they need. The machine has grown heavier. Any exercise requires extra effort, mandatory anticipation, and incessant willpower. I am aware of this, but we have to change and not prepare for the last war we fought. I set a high-level directive for the end of 2012: to be able to "lead high-intensity operational warfare in a dynamic context."

I ask Claude to clearly identify the units designated for Guepard and to reorient their combat exercises along these lines, to take advantage of all opportunities in an offensive campaign, to request additional camps for 2012, to obtain firing practice for these units, courses mixing infantry on foot, in AIFVs, in APCs, with armored AMX-10RCs and Leclerc tanks, with artillery on the Canjuers training grounds. To give substance to all this, we agree to organize, after the 92nd Inf Rgt leaves for Afghanistan in June 2012, an exercise in open terrain to train the brigade's CP and the units from the 3rd that will make up the Guepard QRF. All the camps, firing practice, and combat exercises are redirected toward preparing for violent, offensive battle in plains, open spaces, and cities for the infantry. At the end of 2011, our army was engaged in Afghanistan and was simultaneously carrying out major reforms (downsizing, unit relocations, reorganization of support, etc.). At the same time, our men were suffering the consequences of malfunctions with the Louvois pay calculation software, a joint payroll software. This was affecting leaders and soldiers alike, without any rational explanation. Discontent was widespread. You can ask anything of a soldier, undergo harsh combat exercises, rigorous discipline, leave home for months at a time, face danger, move regularly, even sell your house when your regiment disbands, but distressing their family is unacceptable. It would take a great deal of energy from local commanders, from the chief of staff of the army, from the minister of defense, and the mobilization of his human resources department for several years to stop the major dysfunction that we hardly needed during a period of reform.

A headache for the general staff

The shortage of resources and their centralized management make it more necessary than ever to anticipate and give colonels time to plan strategic shifts.

In the small meeting room, all these sticking points are rightfully exposed. The calendar of activities is full, it's one big game of dominoes where everyone falls into their place: the logistician, the planner, and the

communicator. I am well aware that I am adding a layer but I am firmly convinced that it is possible and even necessary. “Don’t tell me it’s impossible,” said Leclerc.

Claude asks me for two weeks to reorganize his 2012 program that he already sent to Lille, two weeks to reorient everything toward the Guepard QRF, to reserve open fields, shooting courses, CP training exercises… to stop this massive machine in its tracks and send it in a different direction. On the left, I see my communications officer bent over his notebook. He takes notes while consulting the 2012 calendar. For the CP training, everything will rely on him and his small team backed by the communications company. This company of a hundred or so highly specialized men and women are the ones who set up and dismantle the tents, but above all the handle the various information and command systems that enable the general to command his regiments, whether they are static or on the move. He frowns. The deadlines are short, the means very limited. He will be helped by the 28th Communications Regiment stationed in Issoire that the company is paired with, and that we will soon meet in Mali. This lieutenant colonel is definitely one of the most experienced of his generation. He was the first to set up the French CP in Kapisa in a multinational combat zone. I know I can count on him. Later events will confirm this.

On the right, another officer, same rank, same class from Saint-Cyr, asks me, “Who will our enemy be?” He is one of the brigade’s intelligence officers, in constant contact with the regiments’ intel teams that he trains and feeds with classified information about the different theaters. Pragmatic and imaginative, this son of a farmer from Lozère has common sense, a sincere eye, and love for a job well done. He spends his Sundays renovating an old farmhouse at the foot of the Gergovie plateau, and his stories delight the general staff, like his communications counterpart. How do I answer this question? It’s impossible. He knows this. We all know this and yet we must be prepared.

I’m no soothsayer. My intuition stops at the words quick and reaction. The answer is simple but unsatisfactory: “It could be the Middle East or Africa. Only time will tell.” Around the table, the officers in charge of logistics and operations planning measure the work to be done in the next two weeks, on top of everything needed to prepare the 92nd for its departure to Afghanistan, our most pressing objective. Fifteen months later, all these officers will leave under very short notice for Bamako, with maps and laptop in hand and a rucksack on their back. At that time, we were far from imagining that this meeting would be the first step of an exceptional journey.

The stage is set. It would be tedious to explain the 18 months of preparation that preceded the departure of the CP and the units. Some events stand out and deserve special attention to better understand the effort everyone put in, the "lucky coincidences" that allowed different units to reach their objectives with the right combat exercises and the right people. These incidents concern the Africans from the 3rd, but also the units from other ground force brigades which joined the Serval Brigade in January, mainly the colonials from the 9th, the paratroopers and legionnaires from the 11th, without mentioning those who would join us from their African bases.

November 2011

Operation Shower

I made a tour of my base and my quarters. Each building is only as old as its arteries. The funds earmarked for maintaining the infrastructure have dwindled over the years and preventive maintenance is no longer properly carried out. The curative medicine will be just as costly, if not more! I am especially interested in the barracks of my soldiers, in the sanitary facilities, in the daily life of these men and women from whom we ask a lot of effort and discipline. At two bases, I noticed the dilapidated state of the barracks, the poorly insulated windows, the absence of curtains, and the decrepit state of the showers and toilets. Facilities maintenance does their best, directing funds from temporary lodging and the mess halls to improve things, to repaint, but some of the buildings are so old and in need of renovation that the situation represented an unnecessary burden on the infantrymen in Brive and especially on the young recruits in Angoulême. The soldiers show me their barracks. Those sleeping near the window are cold and the shower water is warm at best. They smile at me, embarrassed. One of them is quick to point out: "General, our company is leaving for the Central African Republic soon. At least we won't be cold this winter." The following week in Angoulême, another colonel took me to see the barracks of the young recruits. All the bathrooms on one side are sealed off. The showers are black with mold. The young recruits and their supervisors say nothing. In the training center building, water damage is frequent, ceilings are damaged, and pipes are clogged. This is unacceptable. It will take a year of compiling reports from regular visits to succeed in finding viable solutions. To fix the most pressing issues and offer recruits decent living conditions, I solicit the army for support and a few people in particular: Colonel Christian Bailly, a fellow graduate of Saint-Cyr who part of the general staff and in charge of infrastructure, the colonel in charge of base

procurement, and one of my engineering companies specialized in infrastructure work. This is part of a leader's responsibility, even and especially when money is lacking and conditions are spartan. What does this have to do with Serval? Nothing operational-wise, but it shows the close relationship in terms of cohesion and the bond that unites a demanding leader with his men.

These small projects will take me almost as much time and effort as it takes to prepare the 92nd Inf Rgt for Afghanistan. When Operation Serval began, the young recruits could take showers and their rooms finally had curtains. One of the best moments of this first year was a beer shared with Colonel Christian Tourailles in my office, at the end of this emergency work. Without him, without the mobilization of his team responsible for support, without the mobilization of my combat engineers and my peers in the army's general staff in Paris and Lille, we would not have succeeded. I remember him pulling out of his satchel an unusual gift full of humor and symbolism: a wooden plate with the inscription "Operation Shower 2012" and upon which he had glued a shower head and an empty hand soap dispenser. Shower and Serval were my two victories, two stories about people.

Saturday, February 4, 2012

Fifty years with the artillerymen of Africa

It is 0° F on the windswept plateau of Canjuers. The Siberian anticyclone is toying with us this winter. The African artillerymen of the 68th Afr Arty Rgt stationed in La Valbonne are running their annual firing drill. For several weeks, they train their teams, their batteries to fire the 155 mm Caesar howitzers and 120 mm heavy mortars. They know that artillery fire is not just about cannons, but about training a human chain that starts with front-line observers, computerized command posts, and firing batteries. Computers and laser rangefinders are no substitute for the skill and training of individuals and teams. Snow covers the parking lots and the bivouac areas. After a six-hour drive, I find Colonel Eric Lendroit in his regimental tent. It's Sunday night and he has a surprise in store for me. Surrounded by his officers and his old non-commissioned officers, he raises his glass to celebrate the anniversary of the capture of Belvedere in February 1944 and my 50th birthday. Wrapped up in our parkas, we spend an evening telling each other anecdotes and funny stories from the field. The ambiance in the army is good, its men are happy to be alive, united in the field, and meticulous in the performance of their duty. The next day, we spend on the firing ranges. As a general, this is an opportunity to see my men at

work and at rest to see their state of readiness, and to talk about the things they are concerned about: life on base, the Louvois payroll dysfunctions, their aspirations, and their expectations. The two captains and their men will leave for four and six months in Djibouti and Afghanistan as part of the normal rotation of units in operation. I approach one of the Caesar howitzers. A long steel barrel mounted on a truck chassis and designed for fast, long-distance maneuvers. In the rear, in the cab, computer screens make firing fast and extremely accurate. My artillerymen are numb. They rub their ears with snow between bombardments. Orders and corrections are immediately followed by quick and synchronized movements where everyone knows their place like clockwork.

A sergeant from the French West Indies is in charge. He will deploy to the Afghan Kapisa for the second time. He knows that these shells can strike up to 25 miles away and that whatever happens, those on the front lines will rely on him to avoid being killed when contact with the enemy is made. Approximations and hesitations are forbidden. Seen from the outside, the procedures are rigorous, the orders and the jargon used are incomprehensible, but the shots go off and hit the designated targets on a large limestone plateau, 6 miles away, with an accuracy of less than 10 yards, leaving no chance for imaginary enemies. The sergeant shows me the red button that just has to be lifted in one go to make the 100-pound shell fire off at 3000 feet per second. My first time firing the Caesar. My artillerymen take out an old copper shell casing, pour a little champagne into it, and hold it out to me laughing. It's a tradition! It's impossible to refuse, and I have no intention of doing so. I look at these frozen men. They know they will soon be in the valleys of Afghanistan. We do not know that our destinies are linked and that we will soon meet again on the hot sands of the Sahel a year later firing upon and destroying the MUJWA terrorist katibas. In the meantime, we enjoy a good laugh, along with the mortar crews a little further down the line, the observers, responsible for adjusting the shots, and this other young non-commissioned officer enthralled by his mobile weather station. Hidden out in the forest, he transmits the aerological data needed to calculate the shells' proper trajectory: temperature, pressure, and wind speed calculated at different altitudes by sending up small weather balloons. The means are limited, but sufficient to train by grouping everyone together. I have a keen interest in my artillerymen. Artillery saves the lives of infantrymen out in front, destroying the enemy before having to engage in close-range combat.

The following months are spent by the brigade's units in refresher courses, before leaving for expeditionary operations. These combat exer-

cises are indispensable. The units are constantly changing as people are transferred, return to civilian life, or go to school: the turnover ranges between 20 and 30% every year. With Marie-Jo, my driver, we make our way across France, from Provence to Champagne, from Languedoc to the Massif Central, 37,000 miles a year, the price to pay to get to know these men, to check up on them, to reorient their training, to meet these colonels and captains in the snow, in the rain, by day and by night. "It is the front that commands," said Monsabert. It's true, both in training and in combat. During 2012, after the departure of the "Afghans" and the planned operations, I will do the same with the Guepard QRF units.

February 2012

Dirac maneuvering ground (Charente region)

"Aren't we too late?"

The young recruits continue their training, "their classes" as we used to call them when France still had conscripted soldiers. We've all been there. The training center is located in Angoulême, next to the armored regiment. The young volunteer recruits of the five regiments are trained in this crucible, for the first six months, before taking specialized training for another six months and being integrated with the older troops, in companies, squadrons, and batteries. Every two months, classes of young people leave the center. They completed their basic training during which they first received their kepi and then their brigade badge, handed over by their leaders, in a village with the mayor and their families present. With Hubert Brochier, my executive officer, we make it our duty to preside over this badge ceremony, this formal entry into the Africans' family. Each brigade does the same.

It's 5 pm and it's cold. I spent the afternoon in the small training camp to see the workshops, to discuss with the trainers who conscientiously teach the recruits how to fight. The section is gathered under an old hangar. I give a speech and we share some hot coffee, the opportunity to mingle among the groups and listen to their aspirations. A dozen joyful and close-knit recruits from the French overseas departments, just arrived from their islands, discover the cold and are spending their first nights in the bivouac areas. A short, stocky soldier approaches me. He comes from the Cantal region and asks me the question that is on everyone's mind: "General, Afghanistan is winding down. Aren't we too late?" Around me, everyone is silent and I can feel them lean in for my answer. These young people have signed up to serve, to take part in memorable operational and human experiences. Expeditionary operations remain a strong motivator, the fuel

for their commitment. There are 40 of them looking at me. A general must have the answer. Never lie, trust is a one-shot rifle and only the language of truth allows you to command serenely, to remain credible too. It's better to say you don't know than to lie or give false hope. I look at the young soldier. He asked the right question. I say to him, "I don't know, but what I am sure of is that this world is becoming increasingly dangerous and unstable, that France will always need its soldiers to defend it and that, if we are called into battle, we will have to be ready immediately, because by then it will be too late to train. Forming, equipping, training, and motivating an army takes time." Then I look at them all and add, "Learn your job, we don't know what the future has in store for us. You will be deployed. I don't know where or when, but we will be ready." This message, which I repeated to the five regiments during my visits, was the same one I told my anti-tank company 20 years earlier, without knowing that we would deploy to the Bihac Pocket a few months later. Normally, units are aware of current commitments and future deployments, the unit rotations, but theater openings, emergency departures, and last-minute replacements are among the contingencies that require constant readiness.

Friday, April 27, 2012

An exceptional moment with Alain Mimoun

We have just found the address of Alain Mimoun, a veteran of the Monsabert division in 1943-1944. A native Algerian, wounded in Monte Cassino, Italy, Mimoun rose through effort and merit. A multi-medalist in running, he won the marathon at the 1956 Olympic Games. An example of successful integration, Mimoun is a patriot and a tireless sportsman. Accompanied by my driver and Nadia, my communications officer, he welcomes us in a small house in Bugeat, his wife's village in Corrèze. Mimoun is wearing a tracksuit. We were immediately won over by this extraordinary man, with his keen, dynamic, and attentive eye. We spend three hours chatting with him, though we had planned a much shorter visit. At 91 years old, this African from the 3rd AID, the marathoner, has all his memories intact, his training, his battles during the liberation of France, his meetings with Monsabert, Juin, and de Gaulle. Surrounded by his wife and his daughter Olympe, born on the morning of his victory in Melbourne, he opens a bottle of champagne, honored by the visit of a general commanding his former division. The emotion is shared. This meeting is priceless. Victory, merit, and France are at the heart of our discussions. Mimoun stands up and comes to attention. I'm wearing my dress blues. I take out of my pocket the badge of the 3rd, the three tricolor crescents,

the Victory of Constantine, and I pin it on his tracksuit before embracing him in my arms. Mimoun says nothing. He shakes my hand. This badge was his and still is his. Thirteen thousand Africans, French, Pieds-Noirs, Algerians, and Tunisians died in battle wearing this badge. Seeing him sit there in silence, I understand that he is thinking of them, but this veteran is a fighter and he tells us about the last miles of the marathon, his life as a sportsman, glorious but penniless. Times have changed. I tell him about the Africans of the 3rd, about the life of our army, about our commitments, about the preservation of our heritage and moral strength. We speak the same language. Our references are identical. You don't lead your men to death by chance or out of greed. My driver, Marie-Jo, is waving at me. We have to get back to Clermont-Ferrand. It's raining. I say goodbye to the veteran, his wife, and his daughter. We are not sure we will see each other again. We embrace. I will meet Olympe alone, in the courtyard of the Invalides, on the return from Serval, to pay homage one last time to her father, honored by the President of France. That day, in Bugeat, I knew that I had met a great man, a courageous and deserving Frenchman, a witness to history.

June 2012

The Belvedere exercise in Haute-Loire

The brigade's entire general staff has been mobilized for several months to set up this important event. This is an exercise in open terrain, in a military desert where I came to train with my 150 soldiers some 20 years ago. I am now in command of 5,000 soldiers and I want to train those who will be on QRF standby from the end of September 2012 for six months: the command post and its communications company, the regimental CPs first, the infantry companies and the squadrons second. During the three weeks of maneuvers under the tents, the teams took turns running the brigade's CP, following a well-structured rhythm, and procedures that have been refined over the course of real operational engagements: regular situation updates, requests, orders conceived and drafted as a team under time constraints, decision-making meetings centered around the chief of staff, then the general. A little further on, in the village gymnasium, about 100 officers and specialists from the national CP training center have set up camp for ten days. All these mechanisms are based on a tactical theme, a kind of modern but complex interactive war game, where the brigade running the exercise can win or lose fictitious battles. At the same time, within a 6-mile radius, the AIFVs of the 92nd Inf Rgt and the light armored vehicles from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt squadron stationed in Angoulême

criss-cross the countryside and follow routes where simulated incidents await them: ambushes, mines to stimulate the reflexes of the young commanders and soldiers. At the end of the exercise, the infantrymen join the camp in Canjuers for several days of firing range practice with their weapons, armored vehicles, and missile launchers. Jean-Baptiste, their captain, monitors their training closely. His company did not leave with the rest of his regiment—the 92nd Inf Rgt—for Afghanistan. He and his men are disappointed, but they are not bored. As with the other Guepard QRF units, Claude, the Chief of Staff, prepared for them a particularly dense program of activities, camps, firing, and training in the combat village. Training is never wasted time. It's an investment, it's life insurance.

His friend from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt has just crossed France in light armored vehicles. After ten days in the Haute-Loire, he also went to Provence to carry out maneuvers and firing exercises. These Porpoises, like the Gauls, cross paths and meet again to share their field rations. They will end up fighting together nine months later in the Niger bend, in Timbuktu. "Lucky coincidences" my fellow General Grégoire de Saint-Quentin would say when he listed all these unlikely coincidences on the day I returned to France. Belvedere ends in the rain and in the damp coolness. Trailer showers and field kitchens are set up at the edge of the stadium, facing the bell tower of the village, with its characteristic shape for the region, in the form of a comb. The "human support" resources are now centralized and stored in a depot in Marseilles. It took a great deal of pugnacity on behalf of the general staff to order and obtain these resources, whereas 20 years ago, as a young captain, I set up my field kitchen in the same village with no problems. Safety and hygiene standards, as well as centralized resource management has made it more difficult to get outfitted. Nonetheless, June comes to an end after an operational sequence in line with our expectations. The 150 officers, NCOs, and communicators of the 3rd's command team took full advantage of this demanding period. The team is well trained. We had one working meeting after another, discussions under the CP tents in front of the digital screens and maps. Claude and I have identified the strengths and weaknesses of the cells and the efforts to be made to streamline the design and distribution of fragmentary orders (FRAGOs). The devil is in the details and we have to regularly recalibrate so that everyone knows what the leader wants to achieve by his maneuver: to gain ground, to destroy the enemy, or to buy time.

It's our last Sunday and we have an appointment with the local politicians and citizens, between two forests facing an old concrete and wrought-iron monument. The bugle is on the right and a platoon honor

guard of 20 soldiers is on the left flanked by two small armored vehicles. The general staff officers are lined up beside me, the clouds cling to the tops of a coniferous forest. We pay tribute to the four resistance fighters killed on June 7, 1944. To honor the fallen, the bugle plays the French equivalent of Taps, a slow and mournful tune that pierces men. It has been raining violently for 20 minutes, but no one moves. The mayor of Cayres is present with a surviving resistance fighter and his wife. At the end, veterans and their wives gather for a photo with the flag bearers before bringing out a few bottles and homemade cakes behind a small van. The maneuvers are over, and we drink together in friendship and loyalty, to this rural France that we cherish so.

Saturday, June 9, 2012

In Auvergne

"Your son died for France"

The phone rings at my home. My kids are celebrating their birthday with their friends. The day promises to be cheerful and sunny. My wife hands me the phone, with a puzzled look on her face. In a few minutes I'll have to go, leaving her alone. This morning, a suicide bomber blew himself up near a French armored vehicle in Kapisa killing four soldiers. One of them is from Luzillat, 20 miles away. He doesn't belong to my brigade, but as a departmental military delegate, the procedure is that I go and tell his family. In the midst of the children's shouts, I take down the address and put on my dress blues. My throat is tight. Death has come over me so unexpectedly, the death of a soldier I don't know, the death of a child who was serving France, the death of a son whose parents I will soon meet. I meet with the mayor first, a strong fellow, a farmer full of common sense. The soldier's parents have a small farm a few miles away on a wooded slope next to a hamlet. The courtyard is gently sloping. A tree-lined path leads to it like a hedge of honor, but no one is there. It is Saturday afternoon and Paris is waiting for the families to be notified before making the information public. That's the procedure. The parents must not find out that their son has been killed on the radio. All the families have been contacted and informed except ours, that of Brigadier Yoann Marcillan. All we can do is wait in the yard and we end up waiting more than five hours before his father and mother return home. The presence of the mayor and a general in the front yard is all the parents need to imagine the terrible news to come, knowing full well the risks of our profession. The rest is private, the pain, the dignity, the arrival of soldiers from Yoann's regiment the next morning to be with and support his parents. The military ceremonies in the

courtyard of the Invalides, in the barracks of Champagne in the presence of the political and military authorities are well known as is the burial in the presence of 50 flags from patriotic associations.

Death is never far away

Yoann had enlisted in Clermont-Ferrand in my general staff building. France is at peace and yet, every year, we lose brave sons. War is never far away. For a soldier, for his family, falling in Verdun or in Afghanistan, it's the same thing. After World War I, World War II, and the wars of decolonization, this is the fourth generation of fallen combatants, those sent on expeditionary operations, which are undoubtedly less understandable for a population more concerned about the consequences of the economic crisis than with the risks of global destabilization and interventions in distant lands. It is the generation of the Balkans, Africa, and Afghanistan, the generation of no-end-in-sight commitments of French forces. Yoann has left us. An excellent soldier, he was about to be promoted to non-commissioned officer. The suicide bomber left him no chance that ill-fated morning. It's midnight, I just got home and everyone is asleep. Colorful balloons are still hanging on the front door.

June 9th, anniversaries of life and death. I put my kepi on my desk. I think of my fellow general who commands the French brigade in Afghanistan, the Task Force La Fayette. I think of the leaders, of the group of men who suffered this vile attack. They have just lost four brothers in arms and several of them are wounded. My counterpart must be clenching his fists. He also has to think of his soldiers who are still out there fighting, of their parents, of his wife and his children. This asymmetric war of suicide bombers, ambushes, and underhanded blows is a war of cowards, but we cannot lower our guard. In recent days, my Gauls from the 92nd Inf Rgt have reached Afghanistan and the neighboring province of Surobi, with ground reinforcements from the brigade. They were the brigade's priority: get them ready for battle. They trained for almost a year. Their families will count the days in silence.

There is nothing else I can do. My men and women are gone and this death reminds us, in Puy-de-Dôme, of war, fighting, and loss. I know they will do the best they can, that they are well commanded, but I feel terribly helpless. They are gone. The only thing we can do is wait. They will end up returning in November, all of them.

It's impossible to forget this day, this sleepless night. At the height of the fighting, the decisions made, at the fateful moment to validate the orders of the operation, I often found myself thinking back to the yard

of this small farm and the parents of Yoann, their only son. Every time I had to pick up my old fountain pen in the evening in Tessalit, to write to the relatives of my killed soldiers, I found myself back on that sordid day June 9, 2012. Forgetting nothing, neglecting nothing, fulfilling the mission, doing everything to bring them back, evacuating the wounded, crushing our enemies, and avoiding being taken by surprise. War is not an exact science. Luck and chance are important factors that need to be taken into consideration when applying the rules of war and tactical principles. The death of a soldier is not an accident. It is the result of a confrontation between two forces, two wills.

Sunday, December 2, 2012

General Faure

Like every December 2nd, the Saint-Cyriens* meet on their base to celebrate the Emperor Napoleon, creator of their military academy, and to celebrate the battle of Austerlitz where the first Saint-Cyriens fell on December 2, 1805. It is an opportunity to bring together alumni and Bazars (the nickname given to the young cadets) of all ages, to share news of those who are absent, who are out on operations, and to sing traditional songs at the end of the meal. The most senior officer, the commandant, welcomes the alumni before turning the floor over to the eldest among us, an exceptional officer from Clermont-Ferrand who exemplifies humility. He is a model everyone looks up to and aspires to be like one day. Marcel Faure started in the maquis of Auvergne very young. A Saint-Cyrien during the liberation of France and a classmate of Hélie de Saint Marc, he spent many years in Indochina and Algeria, leading his infantrymen—light infantry and skirmishers—facing down death, living intensely with his men, sharing their joys and sorrows. He knows war inside and out. He can measure a troop's mettle at a glance. Tonight, like every "2S" (December 2nd celebration), he welcomes the youngest cadets. They attended Saint-Cyr 70 years after him, but we share the same values.

The old general finished his career in his native region of Auvergne. My office at Cours Sablon was his 30 years ago. History is never far away between the veterans and the young soldiers. The 50 Saint-Cyriens and their wives are standing, silently. They listen to the general, all eager to hear the two unusual, real-life stories this veteran tells each year during the 2S celebration.

These stories have it all: the role of the leader, a young lieutenant, the rice fields, the Viet Minh ambushes, and the anecdotes that recall the present day and make the audience laugh. Today, Marcel Faure supports

an orphanage run by nuns in Vietnam, a country that he feels infinitely nostalgic about and where his two adopted grandsons come from. The intergenerational filiation of officers and more broadly of veterans cannot be explained, it all blends together and comes alive during these gatherings. The general's little speech is over. We applaud him warmly. A deep friendship binds us, invisible and lasting. We had met 20 years ago when I was commanding my company in Clermont. It was therefore only natural that I had asked him to present me with the Officer's Cross of the Legion of Honor on this past July 14th national holiday celebration. I don't know who was more pleased, he had said to me. Barely back from Mali, he came to greet me at the entrance of our old common office, simply and with paternal affection. He who presided over the Indochina veterans' association knew better than anyone the risk of distance, of misunderstanding between an active expeditionary force and its army, especially when the goals of the war were not shared by our countrymen. On March 28, 2014, one year after the departure of his friend, Commandant Decorse, a survivor of Diên Biên Phu, this dear veteran joined his wife, his brothers in arms, his harkis, and Yoann Marcillan in the Elysian Fields.

Monday, December 17, 2012

Ministerial visit

On the Place de Jaude, in the city center, the military ceremony has just ended. Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and the Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian paid tribute to the courage of the soldiers from the brigade that returned from Afghanistan last month. Symbolically, they marked the end of the Wild Geese combined arms team (CAT), the marching battalion composed mainly of Gauls from the 92nd Inf Rgt, who had left Clermont-Ferrand six months earlier, but also of armored units from Angoulême and artillerymen from La Valbonne. Along with some of his commanders and soldiers, Colonel Haberey was decorated and recognized in front of the public. The ministerial visit includes a speech at the regimental gymnasium, a meal with the troops, and a presentation of the main gear. It is also an opportunity to show the authorities the state of the 3rd Brigade, the Guepard QRF, the men's readiness, unit evaluations, and everyone's motivation, just one month before being deployed, two months before the Adrar des Ifoghas and Gao. We are green for go after a year of hard work led by a close-knit team.

Louvois is toxic

It is 2 pm and 1,000 men and women have listened silently to the speech before singing La Marseillaise at the top of their lungs. When we

sat down to eat, they spoke of the daily life in operations and the difficulties of families affected by the Louvois payroll software, of missing pay and the absence of husbands, and emergency measures taken to avoid the worst. Louvois is toxic for cohesion and casts doubt on the ability of leaders to solve the problems of their subordinates. It will take all of the army's leaders to resolve this situation, to figure out the problems from a community that is reluctant to complain, and to avoid individual and family travesties. The minister listens intently to these stories. There is no revolt, but exasperation and a deep sense of failure to grasp the magnitude of the problem. He will fully commit to changing this defective and destructive system, but it will take time. I will see this sergeant again in the Adrar, without news of his wife for four weeks, and he will explain to me that he had been deployed in less than 48 hours, but that his salary had not been paid.

"Mr. Minister, the Guepard QRF is ready"

The meal is over. We take a tour of the groups of soldiers with their equipment returning from Afghanistan and those on the Guepard QRF. The young sergeants explain their job without inhibition and with passion, surrounded by their soldiers, the infantrymen of the 92nd in full gear next to an armored infantry combat vehicle, the armored units in front of an AMX-10RC tank, and my sergeant smiling at the base of his Caesar. His team is the one from Canjuers. He returned from Surobi, his second tour in Afghanistan.

He explains the characteristics of his howitzer to the prime minister and turns to Jean-Yves Le Drian: "Minister, the Guepard QRF is ready. You can count on us." I will see him again a few weeks later in the Gao region, in front of his howitzer and surrounded by these same artillerymen, with his feet in the sand and that same grin on his face. "General, while you were in the Adrar, we crushed them with our 155 mm. The Gauls will tell you." In Doro, the infantry fighting was very violent. Without the artillery, many infantrymen would have died for France.

Friday, December 21, 2012

Village of Mouthiers-sur-Boëme

Christmas is coming. It is cold and a light rain has begun to fall on the thousand-year-old bell tower of the small Romanesque church in Mouthiers, in the Charente region. Like every other month, I left Clermont to give the young recruits the brigade patch for their right shoulder. This is an opportunity to meet the young soldiers and welcome them to the family. I

asked the commandant to organize these small ceremonies in the villages, to get off base, and invite parents, brothers, and sisters. I asked him to host this ceremony in my mother's village, 10 miles from Angoulême. Life is made of symbols. In eight months, I will have completed my time in command and I have a debt to pay to a man I never knew. His picture has been in my wallet for 30 years, his and his parents'. His name was Chief Corporal Albert Compain, killed at Langson on the Chinese border on December 22, 1946, at the age of 21, and he was my great-uncle. Maquisard*, this follower of Leclerc joined the Colonial Army, the 21st Colonial Inf Rgt, to serve France. Later, he would deploy to Cochinchina and Tonkin where he would be mortally wounded while leading his unit's charge of a small village held by the Viet Minh. At that time, France was emerging from the war against Nazism. His parents were notified by mail three months later. His body was not repatriated until three years later. The mayor, blinded by the ideology and propaganda that was rampant in certain political circles at the time, denied him any honors. He was buried in the village cemetery like a victim of the plague in the presence of his parents and sisters.

People have short memories, but families never forget these injustices and humiliations. His father, a patriot from the Vendée region, had returned lifeless and silent, crushed by the horrors of World War I, after four years as a stretcher bearer on the front line. He had discovered his daughter, my grandmother, while on leave, and had the opportunity to take a photo, leaning against an old stone wall. This photo is of the eternal WWI veteran, his wife, and child. This photo and Albert's photo were the only ones hanging in the main room of the family farm. The fighters and the fallen always have a special place in the hearts of men. Someone who has died for France is someone special. They inspire respect, regret, and pride.

I went to the village square. Young soldiers are standing in formation. Many of the townsfolk are there. The flag bearers, as faithful as ever, are lined up. It must be decades since any ceremony has been held in the village. Today's agenda is somber. Today, we remember the values of a good soldier, the history of the brigade. Today, we pay tribute to a former chief corporal and his 20-year career by presenting a posthumous medal to this conscientious and deserving servant of the state. After the parade in the main street and the wreath-laying at the foot of the war memorial, the sections head to city hall for a toast offered by the brigade. I chose this moment to pay my respects to Albert, his concrete cross and tricolor cockade, in the company of a bugler and three chief corporals of the Colonial Army I selected to accompany me. It's raining. The bugle plays taps as we lay a simple bouquet of flowers together. Real death is that of oblivion. The

mess hall of the 21st Mar Inf Rgt stationed in Fréjus has been named after him for 20 years. The young soldiers have now left Mouthiers. My driver is waiting for me. I removed the medals from my uniform and put my belongings in the trunk. I enjoy the Charente countryside for a last brief moment before heading back east. It smells of good moist earth and wood fire. On the left I can see the peat bogs where, as a child, I spent my mornings fishing with my grandfather, among the moorhens and ducks, wandering the valleys listening to stories of hunting and animals, understanding this brave and enduring world of the earth from which we all spring.

We only have one life and we have to make it meaningful

The cemetery gate is closed. We are back on the road to Auvergne and to my Africans. This trip was somber and short, but I had to do it, like the visit to Mimoun. We only have one life and we have to make it meaningful, never deny our origins but draw from them the strength to go further, reject conformity, seek originality and be able to understand everyone, to adapt, to be forgiving, without forgetting to be demanding and above all never compromise one's principles.

Sixty-six years after Albert's death in combat, one month after this personal pilgrimage, I will meet in Bamako one Colonel Gèze, commander of the 21st Mar Inf Rgt, placed under my command at the beginning of the operation: "Gèze, I have a special affection for your regiment. It was my great-uncle's who was killed in Indochina in 1946." "Me too, sir, I have an affection for your brigade. My grandfather wore your badge, the badge of the Monsabert division. He was killed liberating Marseilles in 1944." The leaders of 3rd and 21st had two good reasons to like and trust each other right off the bat, just days before liberating Timbuktu.

Wednesday, January 9, 2013

Doubt before action

We have been on Guepard standby for more than three months now, ready to deploy at a moment's notice. The president has just made it clear that he will not be sending ground troops to Mali. For weeks, we have been witnessing the destruction of a country's cultural heritage and the horror stories of chopped off hands and heads under the savage application of Sharia law. In Syria, the authoritarian regime and the jihadists are engaged in fierce fighting, again taking the population hostage. My general staff is back on duty after a few days of leave. A small team held down the fort and began to prepare for our spring camp. Claude just reminded me

of tonight's appointment: the staff's New Year's toast to the general, in the grand staircase of the CP building.

On the desk sits a pile of papers, waiting to be signed. Winter has settled in all over France. The Puy de Dôme mountain has regained its white winter cap. I look at the trophy from Operation Shower in the window, a fine operation in our soldiers' interest. Next to the papers sits the small flag of the light infantry and the statuette of the Winged Victory of Constantine. It measures 8 inches and comes from Africa where one of my predecessors had made a limited series of them, ordered from local craftsmen and made with the brass from machine-gun casings. Her arms are open and wings spread out. She looks a bit African, the work of the artist, a little naive, but authentic. She follows me everywhere, out on maneuvers, out in the field. It is our link to the past, the symbol of the French spirit, the rejection of failure, the surge of a nation, and the integration of all in the service of France, the Roman miracle in a way.

They are all here, gathered on the stairs, this team of all ranks, my followers. Each one has their own personal story, their difficulties, their joys, but all wear the same badge. For the first time, I am overcome by doubt. For months, everything has been focused on Guepard: readiness, evaluations, and not once have I doubted this course of action. If nothing happens in the next two months, we will have done our job and will not have been caught off guard. Operational readiness and holding oneself to high standards are never useless. The great battles are often won before the fighting even begins, and motivating the troops is part of the long game.

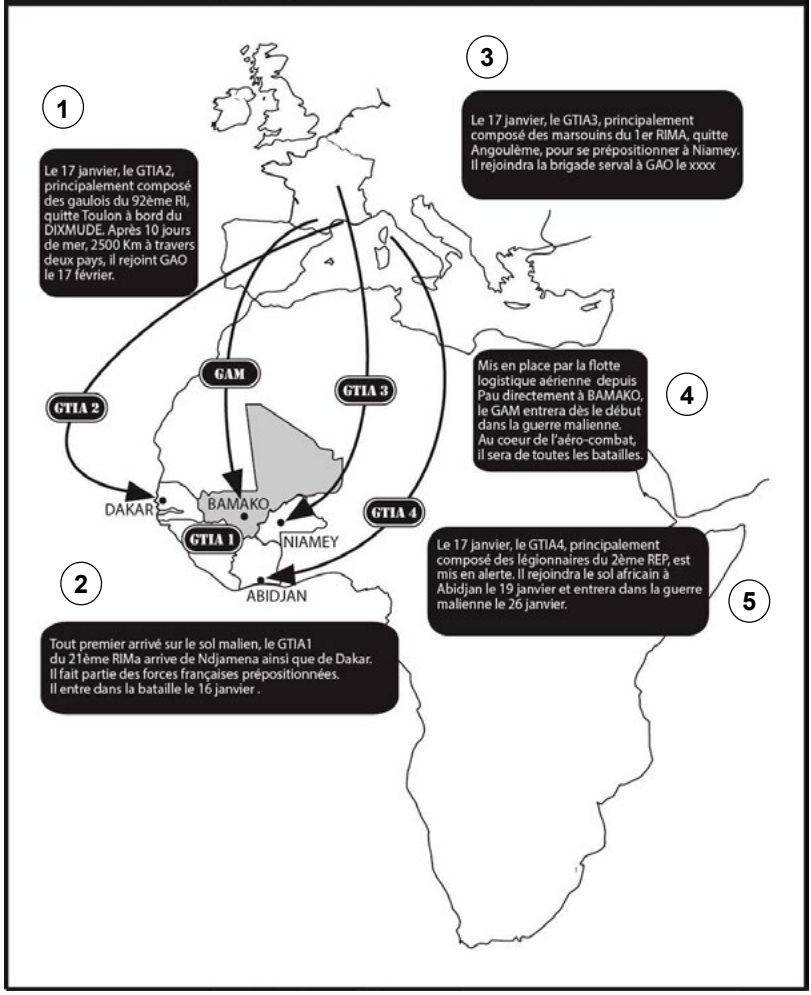
Leclerc and Monsabert, those generals were lucky

Both the Army of Africa and the 2nd Armored Division won because they got top-notch American equipment, but above all because they were commanded by charismatic leaders and their units knew how and wanted to fight. This is the conclusion I draw from Monsabert's "War Notes" which I have just finished reading on the evening of January 9th. On the cover, the victor of Belvedere has an honest and serene smile.

In the final pages, he talks of unity and will. For 30 years, since Saint-Cyr, this leader has challenged me, a lucky, victorious leader who had a sense of service, process, and panache, a true guide, that our army counted so much on during the difficult periods of our history. Before I go to bed, I put this book away on my bookshelf. As very few copies were printed, it took me a long time to find it. Colonel Gaujac, a veteran from Algeria and passionate military historian and expert in the Army of Africa, told me about it. To the left of Monsabert's notes is a book on Leclerc: it is Provence

and Normandy combined, fighting in difficult terrain and armored raids, the skirmishers, the Pieds-Noirs and the resistance, complementarity and union, the two leaders who liberated and defended Strasbourg. These men rose to the occasion and they were lucky.

Part 2


21 janvier : Déploiement de la brigade SERVAL
1
Le 17 janvier, le GTIA2, principalement composé des gaulois du 92ème RI, quitte Toulon à bord du DIXMUDE. Après 10 jours de mer, 2500 Km à travers deux pays, il rejoint GAO le 17 février.
3
Le 17 janvier, le GTIA3, principalement composé des marsouins du 1er RIMA, quitte Angoulème, pour se prépositionner à Niamey. Il rejoindra la brigade serval à GAO le xxxx
GAM
GTIA 2
GTIA 3
GTIA 4
GTIA 1
DAKAR
BAMAKO
NIAMEY
ABIDJAN
Mis en place par la flotte logistique aérienne depuis Pau directement à BAMAKO, le GAM entrera dès le début dans la guerre malienne. Au coeur de l'aéro-combat, il sera de toutes les batailles.
4
Le 17 janvier, le GTIA4, principalement composé des légionnaires du 2ème REP, est mis en alerte. Il rejoindra le sol africain à Abidjan le 19 janvier et entrera dans la guerre malienne le 26 janvier.
5
2
Tout premier arrivé sur le sol malien, le GTIA1 du 21ème RIMa arrive de Ndjamena ainsi que de Dakar. Il fait partie des forces françaises prépositionnées. Il entre dans la bataille le 16 janvier .

1. The 17 January, GTIA2, mainly composed of the "Gauls" from the 92e RI (Inf Rgt), leaves Toulon aboard the DIXMUDE Navy Amphibious ship. After 10 days at sea, 2,500km through 2 countries, the Battle Group is in Gao 17 February.
2. The first one to arrive in Mali, GTIA1 made from the 21e RIMa (Marine Inf Rgt) arrives from Njamena and from Dakar. It belongs to the French forward presence Forces. It comes in the battle the 16 January.
3. The 17 January, GTIA3, mainly composed of the "Marsouins" from the 1er RIMa (Marine Armor Rgt) leaves Angoulème to deploy to Niamey.
4. Set in place by the Air logistic fleet from Pau, directly to Bamako, GAM enters the Malian fight since the beginning. Heart of Combined Arms Aviation fight, it will take part to all the battles.
5. The 17 January, GTIA4, mainly composed of 2e REP' legionnaires, is under alert. It will join Abidjan 19 January and Malin 26 January.

Figure 1. Deployment of the SERVAL Brigade. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

From Clermont-Ferrand to Timbuktu

January 11, 2013 – February 2, 2013

Friday, January 11, 2013

The jihadists are our enemies

The radio has just announced two operations: the failed attempt to release our hostage Alex in Somalia and the air raids against the jihadist columns in the Niger bend that led to the death of Captain Damien Boiteux, a special forces helicopter pilot. The terrorists have crossed the Rubicon, too sure of their impunity and the passivity of the French and their African allies. This news will mark the beginning of a familiar story, a rapid campaign in response to an aggression. In Clermont, we follow the events, the Malian president's appeal, the swift and willing response of the French and Chadian presidents, the first engagements by the air force and special forces groups on the ground, and President Hollande's speech to the ambassadors on the 11th. Clermont is blanketed in snow. We await our orders, still unable to know if this response will be limited to the units pre-positioned in Africa—the first responders sent in to douse the flames—or if the Guepard QRF will be deployed. Like every Friday, alongside Claude, we raise the colors in front of the command post before singing the *Africans*. The ambiance is not the same. The instructions to be on alert were naturally given for the coming weekend. The Guepard QRF cells have been activated as a precautionary measure.

Saturday, January 12, 2013

Guepard QRF

"Recall your men to base"

It's 9 am, and there is no news. So, I put the kids' sleds in the trunk and I'm about to take them to the eastern slope of the Puy de Dôme. 10 am, Alert. The strategic OCCC calls me. The first echelon of Guepard is triggered in addition to the pre-positioned forces in Africa. The brigade is not yet involved. The OCCC directs the operations from its war room in the basement of its headquarters on Saint-Dominique Street in Paris. These officers are trained in this type of exercise and they know exactly what joint capabilities they have available in metropolitan France and overseas: ships, aircraft, and ground forces. The OCCC is the armed wing of the CSAS, in direct and regular contact with the Ministry of Armed Forces—headquartered at the Hotel de Brienne—and the president, during restricted councils.

Bamako is the top priority

For the time being, the ground force is made up of the first battalion, called CAT 1 (combined arms team), consisting of units from our bases in Chad, Ivory Coast, and Senegal, reinforced by a company of 156 Porpoises from the 2nd Mar Inf Rgt stationed in Le Mans. This CAT was given the mission to reach and protect Bamako, where the Malian government and thousands of French, European, and American citizens are located. At the same time, CAT 4—a parachute battalion composed of units located in Africa and Corsica—was put on alert. I can see that everything is going according to plan in light of the circumstances: an unforeseen operation of this magnitude. Priority was given to the units already in the region, and the light units of Guepard were deployed: a company from the 9th, our sister brigade, was put on alert as well as airborne units, which could be rapidly deployed, but on foot. The question is whether the second echelon of the Guepard QRF will deploy to Mali: a brigade-level CP capable of commanding several CATs (i.e. several thousand men) and one or more other CATs equipped with armored vehicles. My colleague from the OCCC tells me that everything is on the table and that we must be ready, even if the decision has not yet been made. Claude is informed and we head to the CP at Cours Sablon for an emergency meeting with the Guepard cell. My wife understands. Disappointed, the children take off their furry jackets, and I leave them wearing my uniform and parka. The road is icy, the sidewalks slippery. Half an hour later, my five colonels are warned that the alert was imminent. The day goes by quickly. The entire staff is mobilized. The Guepard cells act just as if it were an exercise, updating the availability of equipment and personnel on the screens. The work of the last few months has paid off, haste makes waste. All five regiments are mobilized.

Everyone is waiting for orders. The captains have been notified. They called their men back to their bases and informed them not to stray too far. Departures are theoretically staggered between two and nine days, but we know that everything will depend on the situation on the ground, the aircraft and ships available, and the capacity choices that will soon be made.

"Go into town and buy everything you can find on Mali"

My intelligence officer has just joined me in the office with his former classmate who is in charge of CP communications. In three days, we have changed worlds. There is no longer any room for doubt, but only for anticipation and emergency preparation. "I think we're going to do the Belvedere exercise again, but for real and much bigger. Go into town and buy everything you can find on Mali: guidebooks, maps, and history books.

For communications, quickly take an inventory of what we are missing and notify the 28th in Issoire. We will certainly need their help." The two lieutenant colonels smile. The first and his team has just finished drafting a memo on the jihadist groups in Mali with his colleagues from the 9th, the second is in daily contact with the communications officers in Issoire, who are also on the Guepard QRF to ensure the link-up with the brigade's higher levels, which they will do a few days later. They have left the room, and I open my desk drawer. I come across an army-issued brown notebook. I have never kept a journal during my previous tours in the Balkans or in Africa. I have the intuition that the scope and nature of this one will be totally different. I open it and write: "*January 12th at 10 am, call from Michel (OCCC)*[1]*"* From then on, this little notebook and its black twin would follow me everywhere, tucked into a pocket of my satchel.

Major Erwan is responsible for keeping track of equipment, from the large vehicles to automatic pistols, from tank shells to oil drums. In regiments, supplies are limited. They are limited to the equipment needed to train and instruct small cells. The general staff of the ground forces in Lille closely monitors brigade and camp vehicles allocated to the Guepard QRF. Those of the 3rd will not be enough to equip a CAT. We know that depending on the price tag, gear might have to travel thousands of miles if we are missing anything, and we do not yet know who or what will be deployed. The major enters the office. He too has anticipated this situation. He knows exactly what is in good condition and what he will not have to ask for, so as not to compromise the training of units that will remain in France. "General, we're ready, but in two hours, a train loaded with AIFVs is set to leave Clermont for a firing exercise in Great Britain. It's Captain Jean-Baptiste's company, which has been on standby for seven days." We look at each other and we are both thinking the same thing. We need to stop him right now, block the Gauls from the 92nd, the priority is operations. The 15 armored infantry vehicles weighing 25 tons each will not get the chance to cross the English Channel. Instead, they will head south to Dakar and Gao, for violent battles in desert wadis.

Sunday, January 13

A major joint operation

A day of discussions with Paris, with the regiments kept up to speed on the situation. On the basis of planning work and studies done by the general staff, Paris is considering the best capability force to meet the ex-

1. Phrases or sentences in quotation marks and italics are from General Barrera's notebooks, written during Operation Serval in Mali in 2013.

pectations of the president. After the first, emergency echelon, command structures need to be set up to coordinate the air-land operations that will follow. The CATs that will have to maneuver and fight in a country that is twice the size of France will also need to be formed. I am well aware that Paris will determine who will be in charge of the different CPs, as well as the nature and size of the forces that will have to be deployed in the days to come. Any operation of this scale naturally includes a CP for each component: one for ground operations and another for air operations. In other words, an army CP, an air force CP and, above that, an operational or theater CP, to coordinate joint operations, synchronize ground support, and plan and conduct logistical support. In the days that followed, General Grégoire de Saint-Quentin was rightly put in charge of the operational CP as he has been stationed in Dakar for more than a year, is in charge of the region, and is well acquainted with the African stakeholders in the area. Air operations were initially prepared and conducted from the N'Djamena CP, then from the Lyon-Mont Verdun CP. As for the ground CP, I was put in charge to lead the air-land battles with helicopter reinforcements and regional capabilities, as well as liaison units with the African contingents and civil-military affairs.

On the evening of the 13th, when reporting on our possibilities to Paris, we are almost certain that the 2nd echelon would be deployed. The person I spoke to on the phone told me that we would be leaving the next day at the earliest or in three days at the latest.

Monday, January 14

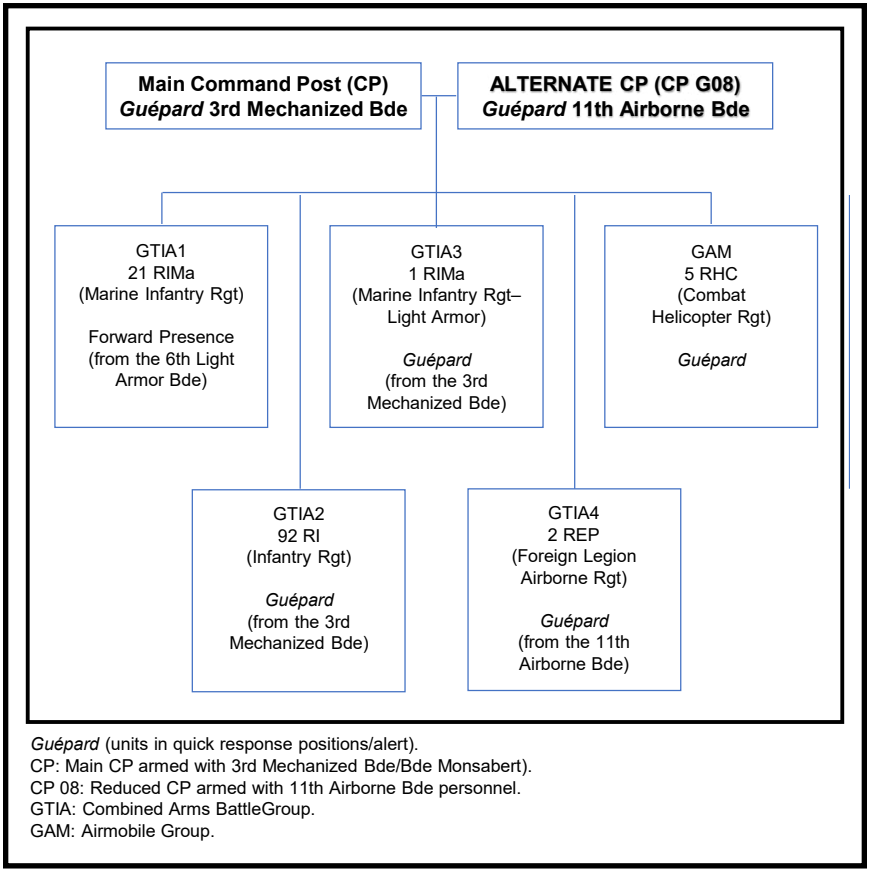
The Guepard Brigade will consist of five battalions

The decision is made. Confirmations arrive in the form of messages. We are no longer in the context of strictly triggering a Guepard QRF, but rather in a "generation of forces," in other words, defining what is needed to adapt to the crisis. In addition to the two CATs (1 and 4), it becomes quickly apparent that there will be a brigade CP for the ground component, a helicopter battalion known as a HU (helicopter unit) and not just one, but two other CATs, one of which will have two AIFV companies. According to the planned division of roles, I designate Colonel Gougeon of the 1st Mar Inf Rgt stationed in Angoulême to form CAT 3, equipped with AMX-10RC armored vehicles, LAVs, and infantry APCs. For CAT 2, composed of two AIFV units, I designate Colonel Bert, newly arrived at the head of the 92nd Inf Rgt. These men make up the majority of the battalion. It will be reinforced with a squadron of armored vehicles from our sister brigade. All this seems simple, except that the 92nd has just returned from

Afghanistan and that setting up a second AIFV company was not planned. Furthermore, Claude and I note that the headcount at the brigade CP is insufficient and that we will not be able to last long. We need 30 commanders to function properly, an AIFV company and a lot of gear to reach the Miramas depot, ports, and airports. We now know what is required of us. All ground forces will mobilize in the coming hours and days to get us what we need. The 2nd AIFV company is partly filled out by infantrymen from the 126th. The armored vehicles are taken from a firing range in the South of France. The Puy-de-Dôme prefecture, alerted in real time, issues missing passports in record time. Military doctors give vaccinations and complete medical records from morning to night. The insurers have life insurance contracts signed for everyone who joins the QRF. The bases turn into beehives.

For my part, I call my fellow generals to fill out my CP. I need to find more tactical officers to conceive and draft orders, but also an executive officer with whom to share everything and a military assistant to assist me in my tasks of reflection and writing. In these cases, it is always better to prepare and propose who you want, rather than be subjected to who you are given, and above all to surround yourself with a good team. I know I have to choose these two officers carefully, because we will be together from start to finish and I don't want to have to adapt to them. I need subordinates who are honest, principled, and good-natured. I have a few names in mind, but finding people that are available in the middle of the year is never easy. Good people are always indispensable to their leaders. I think back to a captain from the 92nd Inf Rgt I met briefly at a ceremony a few months earlier. I ask Claude what he thinks as he knows him well, having had him under his command. He has just passed the war school exam and his leader agrees to part with him for Mali. The next day, Rémi is in my office in Clermont. He is ready to join the 3rd, leaving his wife and children on very short notice. At the same time, two older officers made themselves known. A smiling captain seems to me to be the best choice and the officer is appointed. He commanded the 4th Company of the 92nd Inf Rgt two years ago, one of those which is about to deploy. In a few minutes, I lay down the rules and what I expect of him. I'm familiar with the role of a military assistant. I held this position for two years in Lille, as colonel to the head of the ground forces, a position that allowed me to see all the brigades in France, overseas and in operations, a position that requires situational intelligence and above all discretion. Rémi will follow me everywhere, discovering a world very different from that of the other captains. Choosing an executive officer is never easy.

Again, I wanted someone who could fit into the existing team, a facilitator, someone who could replace me. I took the gamble of calling on a Foreign Legion colonel stationed in Lille, whom my colleague Jean-Pierre Palasset willingly agreed to "lend" me. I soon realized that we had had the same start in a military college and that Denis was calm, perceptive, and full of good advice, which was a perfect counterweight to my sometimes impatient character. He, too, had attended Mr. Dalverny's geography classes in Aix and had learned his lessons in life and morals, the most striking of which was "whatever your rank, wherever you are, be serious, but don't take yourself too seriously." Before appointing him, I conferred with my close team. He was younger than Claude and from the same class as my two lieutenant colonels, but their reaction was unambiguous, and everyone fell into agreement. Denis was the executive officer I needed! In my absence, he commanded operations in the Niger bend for six weeks with efficiency and loyalty.



Guépard (units in quick response positions/alert).
CP: Main CP armed with 3rd Mechanized Bde/Bde Monsabert).
CP 08: Reduced CP armed with 11th Airborne Bde personnel.
GTIA: Combined Arms BattleGroup.
GAM: Airmobile Group.

Figure 2. SERVAL Task Organization.

There is no chance we'll deploy today. So much the better. My two rucksacks are ready, as is my satchel, but before I go, I want to make sure that the CP and the CATs have everything they need. I find myself alone with Hubert, still as calm and full of common sense as usual. I'm going to leave him the keys to the 3rd Brigade, the acting commander for the half that won't deploy with us. "Hubert, you hold down the fort with the colonels of the regiments. I don't know when we'll be back, but keep tabs on the families. We will surely have losses." For four months, he will command the 3rd of France without the slightest misstep, carrying on with combat exercises for the remaining units, monitoring closely the young recruits, the succession, and the families.

Tuesday, January 15 – Thursday, January 17

Waiting to depart, talking to his men

The CP's departure is announced every day, then postponed depending on availability and air transport. On the morning of the 15th, I ask Bert to assemble the two companies waiting to depart. I don't know if I'll still be in Clermont tomorrow. I'm not sure I'll see them again when they arrive in Mali. It's 8:30 am. Snow is covering the roofs. The cold bites at the ears and fingertips. The colonel turns around and introduces me to the 400 Gauls ready to go. I walk through and review them, taking the time to look them in the eyes. They are serious and have several tours under their belts. Some, volunteers, returned from six months in Afghanistan only two months ago. I recognize many of them, having met them on the firing ranges of Larzac, Canjuers, and Courtine. For over a year, they have been preparing with their AIFVs. Some have recently completed three weeks of urban combat exercises in Sissonne. Little did they know that in the coming month they would face 20 suicide bombers in the streets of Gao. They will be victorious without any casualties, methodically applying what they learned during their combat exercises. Both captains are just over 30 years old. Twenty years ago, I was in their place in this beautiful "Auvergne regiment," preparing to leave for the Bihac Pocket in Bosnia. The looks on their faces are the same. This time we are ready, and, unlike other operations, we have no idea about what lies ahead. I tell them what they can already sense.

They will take part in a "theater opening" after a long trip. We'll be far from everything and we'll have to stick together and trust each other, just like we did during our exercises. It will be very hot and the pace will be quick. The infantry will be on the front line again, but they won't be alone. They are ready, but we will send the second company of AIFVs later, to give them time to make their final preparations and last-minute

adjustments. My driver takes me back to the CP downtown. He too will leave. He tries not to forget anything. I take out my service phone, which is difficult to use with its tiny keyboard. "Marie-Jo, we have to replace it. It might be even more useful over there." This was indeed the case, and without it the first few days would have been more complicated.

On the 16th, the OCCC confirms that I have been ordered to deploy to Bamako with the CP of the 3rd. The departure dates are still unknown. We later learned that the CP would depart from Paris by plane, that CAT 3 would be flown by wide-body aircraft to Niamey in Niger, and that CAT 2 would take French navy ships to Dakar, then head to Bamako over land. The units return to their departure areas. Ammunition trucks criss-cross France. The regiments leave with their limited supplies and spare parts, which is enough for them to hold out for the first month with almost no logistical support, besides fuel. CAT 1 has set up camp outside of Bamako. Its units, sometimes tens or even hundreds of miles apart, advance toward the Niger River. They have seized the Markala Bridge, the only bridge to Gao, 600 miles to the east. Directly commanded by the OCCC, Colonel Gèze has protected the capital and carried out reconnaissance pending the arrival of the brigade's Guepard QRF. His CP is small and has limited resources. He sleeps little and does the best he can. At the same time, the HU has landed in Mali and carried out its first flights. In Clermont-Ferrand, we are following the situation closely. I discuss our first impressions with Grégoire over the phone, and he tells me of his intention to install his forward CP in Bamako.

Friday, January 18

Instructions in Paris

"Bernard, you're going to have the mission of a lifetime: the liberation of a country"

The forces are coming together. Some units are still in the process of being assigned to the different CATs. I spend the day with Claude's and my superiors in Paris getting personal instructions from the general staff of the armies. At the OCCC, I meet with its executive officer, Patrick Brethous. He will be my contact throughout the campaign. We have known each other for 35 years, military college in Aix and the same class at Saint-Cyr. We both chose the mechanized infantry in Germany in 1986. He then moved on to helicopters. I remained an infantryman. Our relationship is frank and direct. He in Paris, Grégoire in Bamako, me between Gao and Tessalit. Another "lucky coincidence," that of a chain of command imbued with trust. Things are falling into place. The instructions are quick and precise. The future missions and the timetable are not defined, but we quickly understand that Gèze

is waiting for us, and that the OCCC, which has been running everything from afar, will be relieved to see us take over. The political pressure is intense. We need to move quickly and regain the upper hand. There are numerous terrorist enclaves in the Ouagadou Forest, near the Mauritanian border, near Niger, and in the North, less than 60 miles from Algeria. We look at the maps of Mali, the roads, the climate data. We will be far from the Haute-Loire, far from the Champagne region. We'll just have to keep the same principles and overcome the distances. In the room set up for the "Mali" crisis cell, the screens show images of Harfang drones and fighter planes flying over the North of the country. Cots have been placed against a wall. At the OCCC, officers follow the situation day and night while other officers plan future operations, and some monitor the theaters by devising plans or potential courses of action to follow. We see many familiar faces, colleagues met in France or in other theaters of operation. This day of acculturation filled us in on the system that was in place, future departures, and political objectives. Michel, another former classmate of mine and paratrooper colonel, has been writing tactical orders for over a week. Always available, this officer is one of the best. With Patrick, they see me leave with envy. "Bernard, you're going to have the mission of a lifetime: the liberation of a country, raids all the way to Niger and Algeria." We don't have time to grab a beer in a local bar. I leave them a bottle of whisky and another in the Mali cell to drink to the health of the brigade once we are engaged. My officers are waiting for me to return to Clermont. "Good luck, Bernard, show them what the Africans of the Monsabert Brigade are made of." The door closes on the diligent staff, hard at work behind the scenes. It's cold outside at the top of the stairs. We return to the airport in Villacoublay where a small liaison airplane is waiting to take us straight to Clermont-Ferrand.

Saturday, January 19

Busy day ahead. We just got word about the final composition of the CATs leaving for Mali. The CATs and HU are positioned around Bamako and are preparing to take Diabaly if there is no jihadist push back. In France, CAT 2 and 3 are armed by the 3rd with units from the 9th and the intelligence brigade to locate and identify the enemy. CAT 4 reaches Abidjan, ready for an airborne drop. The executive officer of the 11th Airborne Brigade, Colonel Xavier Vanden Neste, whom I will call Xavier, his chief of staff, Colonel Laurent de Bertier, and about 30 officers and non-commissioned officers have been activated for the Guepard QRF. They left a Franco-British exercise without notice to take their orders and head to Abidjan. This small brigade-level CP, called G08, has the capacity to carry out ad hoc sorties for short periods of time. It will find its rightful place in

the Serval Brigade, and I will use them as a forward CP, first in Gao, then in the North.

The plans are clear, even though they will require some minor adjustments in the coming days. The situation on the ground is becoming clearer. At the end of the day, we learn that the departure is planned from Roissy on the 21st in the afternoon, so departure from Clermont early in the morning. The weather is terrible, the roads slippery. My ever so helpful driver Marie-Jo managed to find me three sand-colored fatigues. We are all reminded of the Gulf War. In the corridors of the CP, bags and crates have been stacked up for several days. Everyone is waiting for orders. After the initial intensity of the activation, my Africans only want to leave. We have been telling our families tonight will be the last night for several days now. We come home late. Our minds are elsewhere, and we are aware that we are going to leave them for an unknown period of time. The evening meeting convinces me that everything is in order. The entire army is behind us.

I look out the window and think about the tragedy of the day before. Three soldiers from Nîmes who were heading up to Clermont-Ferrand in a civilian vehicle for the operation hit a truck across the highway near Issoire: snow and black ice. Staff Sergeant Simon, Chief Corporals Ameur and Danger died in the accident before they even reached Clermont. I think of their families. What a tragedy! They are never spoken of, and yet they must be associated with the fallen of Serval. They died in the line of duty, on a mission. It's dark. Claude is still in his office on the first floor. "Tomorrow, take care of your family, we'll have time to meet again later."

Sunday, January 20

Tomorrow, we'll be gone.

Vigil of arms before the departure. This is the moment when you have to say what is essential while giving the impression that it's a day like any other, the day when all the words count, when the hours pass by too quickly. Leaving without notice is brutal, but in the end it is less traumatic for the families than a departure announced several months before the flight to Afghanistan, "death row," as some military wives would say to me. It's snowing and I decide to do what I couldn't do eight days earlier, a day of sledding with the family on the hills of Ceyssat. A young lieutenant does the same with his son. Tomorrow, he will head to Toulon and me to Paris. For the families, a departure is never easy. It is difficult for everyone.

Monday, January 21

Snowstorm in France

Do not miss the plane at Roissy

I reached the CP at 5 am. Hubert is there. The bags are in the car. I'll take a civilian flight in fatigues. Claude and his team will join us with a government-chartered long-haul flight. My communications staff is already in Bamako to install the first CP. We have been instructed not to communicate about our departure. It is never a good idea to tell the enemy that a brigade CP is leaving France. They would quickly deduce the strength of our forces to come: several thousands. So I leave without telling the press and the elected officials, only the prefect Eric Delzant, who has been working hard with his entire staff since we were put on alert. The road to Paris is long, strewn with traffic jams due to the snowstorm. I have time to go back to the OCCC to get the final instructions.

I see my two classmates, but also Jean, an aviator friend at the OCCC, and Jean-François, the army's representative at the OCCC. I was with Jean and Grégoire at the French National War College and the Advanced Military Studies School (AMSC). Jean-François was in my position in Lille five years ago. The five of us, colonels and generals, have lunch together as friends. It's 4 pm. I just went through security at Roissy with Rémi. The agent made me remove my boots, probably too metallic. I explained to a very serious young agent that the statuette of Victory in my satchel was not dangerous and that I needed it. I take the initiative to buy a bottle of whisky for the operation. It will return to France after having toured Mali in its plastic pouch. Having decided on my arrival to ban strong alcohol in the brigade, I could not break my own rule.

The plane takes off. After Eastern Chad and Ivory Coast, this is the third time that I have been to Africa. Bamako Airport is lit and the night heat contrasts with the Parisian cold. The advance party is waiting for me at arrivals in their fatigues. At the same time, other people in civilian clothes welcomed my colleague François Lecointre, commander of the 9th Marine Infantry Brigade stationed in Poitiers. He will take command of the European mission to train the Malian army north of the capital. It is late, I head to a group of small prefabricated bungalows near the airstrip, the "Chinese Village," to spend my first night in Africa. We are here and ready.

Tuesday, January 22

The situation in Bamako

Very busy day. The aim was to get a feel for the situation, to get an idea of it from the reports and successive meetings with the two colonels already on site (Gèze for CAT 1 and Gout for the HU), to understand what Paris wanted, and to coordinate with the theater CP that was being set up at the airport at the same time. We have to move quickly, but with whom, with what, against whom and how?

The brigade's communications are already set up. They are responsible for installing the CP, but also for providing security of the chosen sites. The young captain from Clermont-Ferrand wasted no time. He did a tour of the airport and found an abandoned hangar near the Chinese Village and the white building where Grégoire's forward CP is being set up. The hangar is totally empty. His men and women are sweeping up clouds of dust. Others have found boards and are starting to make makeshift tables and tack boards. One group takes out electrical cables to power the laptops and printers. A lieutenant shows me around a small room that will serve as a less noisy meeting room and a room without windows where I can be alone to draft my first orders. The toilets are condemned. Latrines, or sanitary facilities, are dug, just like during the Belvedere exercise, only it was 80° F hotter this time! A warrant officer stacks food rations and water packs. Without waiting, I find Gèze and his team before going to meet Gout in the middle of the helicopters, a mile further. By the end of the morning, I will have a clearer idea of the system in place, its capabilities, and the bottlenecks.

Gèze's battalion between Bamako and the jihadists

Gèze commands a motley CAT made up of hastily arrived units from all over the region. A total of 700 men and 250 vehicles, including 100 armored vehicles. This emergency force deterred the jihadists from continuing toward Bamako, especially since they had been hit by fighter aircraft and special forces, but the area is vast and the force's resources are limited. Following orders from the OCCC, he "pushed" his units eastward. The Markala Bridge is under their control and its front-line units hold Diabaly on the road to Timbuktu, and Sévaré on the road that leads to Gao. These units are 250 and 370 miles from Bamako. His CAT CP is severely understaffed. In 2004, I was in his place in Chad and even back then the regiment's CP—called "Ground Team"—was limited to a handful of officers.

The mortars lack towing vehicles and they have been dismantled and placed in trucks, making them less useful. Gèze does not complain. His

Porpoises from the 21st, his legionnaires from the 1st Foreign Legion Cavalry Regiment stationed in Orange, his light cavalry from the 1st Parachute Hussars Regiment [airborne light cavalry] stationed in Tarbes, and his Porpoises from the 3rd Marine Airborne Infantry Regiment stationed in Carcassonne have been in Africa for three months. They are used to the heat and their morale is excellent. They're ready to receive orders and waiting for logistics to catch up.

In 48 hours, the helicopters will be ready for offensive maneuvers

Gout is in a different situation. His helicopters recently disembarked from wide-body aircraft, arriving from the 5th Combat Helicopter Regiment stationed in Pau. He has transport helicopters (Pumas) and attack helicopters (Gazelles) armed with anti-personnel guns or anti-tank missiles. He awaits the arrival of his Tigers, the latest addition to the family, practically a flying tank capable of firing 30 mm shells and rockets. His CP is already set up in a hangar. Two hundred and fifty men are in tents and his trucks are ready to go to the next engagement area. He expects to be operational within 48 hours.

Before taking stock with my small advance party—the "tip of the spear"—I head to the other side of the Bamako airstrip to meet with the QRF company from the 2nd Mar Inf Rgt. The "Camels" have parked under open aviation hangars near old rocket launchers and Malian fighter jets that are no longer functional. They left Le Mans in a matter of hours. They settle in as best they can. They will take part in every fight: Timbuktu, Gao, and Adrar. These men are commanded by a direct, humane, and charismatic captain, whose company I always enjoy, someone who could lead their men to the end of the world.

I go back to the hangar. Marie-Jo has found some mangoes, which we cut up to improve the rations that will be our daily lot for the next four months. We quickly eat our lunch along a low wall with some communications officers. The heat does a number on the body.

Early in the afternoon, I meet with the colonels and Claude who has just arrived, accompanied by his team. Stuck on the highway due to the snow, he was afraid he wouldn't make it to Roissy, let alone take off. We take stock of our units, of the intelligence on our rather elusive enemy, and of our logistical means, limited to the bare minimum. I give them an objective: come up with a plan to resume our progression as quickly as possible and to march, or rather to rush toward Timbuktu while holding the Markala Bridge and our position in Sévaré.

I am well aware of the difficulties. They are real, but this is a race to the finish and there is no question of waiting six months before resuming our advance. We list them to try to find solutions: distances are measured in hundreds miles. We are very far from our usual benchmarks, from our typical doctrine. Radio resources are insufficient, the units lack spare parts, components, and specialized vehicles: no CP vehicles to command and no maintenance vehicles. The men have been on the go for a week and they haven't slept much. Ammunition allocations are still missing for some weapons. Not all the bulletproof vests have arrived, nor have the containers. And yet, the main positions are being held and reports go up the chain of command. Ears perk up at the sound of the word Timbuktu.

Three roads to Timbuktu

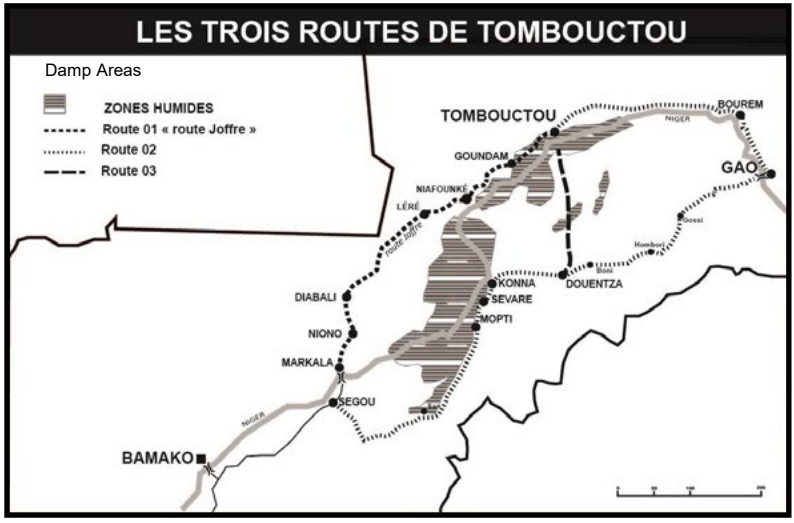


Figure 3. The Three Roads to Timbuktu. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

I call the OCCC which gives me guidance on the overall maneuver. They're going to hand over tactical responsibilities to me. The objective is to seize Timbuktu and the Gao bridge, 600 miles away, as quickly as possible. They have a few special forces groups capable of carrying out ad hoc and targeted sorties, but they are unable to hold out over extended periods of time due to their small size. They know they can count on the last Malian units of Senior Colonel Dacko, currently regrouping in Sévaré, but also on the paratrooper companies of CAT 4 in Abidjan. They can be transported quickly by Transall aircraft, provided there is a usable runway. This infantry can hold out against a determined enemy, but it has no or very few vehicles, so it must be quickly reinforced by an armored column.

This is what will happen in Gao, Timbuktu, and Tessalit. The OCCC is considering all our options and asks us to suggest ways to take back Timbuktu. With Claude, we take out our maps of Mali and we quickly identify three solutions to reach the two cities:

–Solution #1: Carry out an armored raid due east on Gao and head up to Timbuktu via the northern banks of the Niger River. We know that the first part would be easy. The road is straight and paved all the way to Gao. On the other hand, we have no information on the tracks north of the river.

–Solution #2: Make for Sévaré and then head due north on a paved road to the southern river banks of Timbuktu. The easiest and fastest solution. I see only one problem: the Niger River. The river crossing is managed by civilian ferries.

–Solution #3: Go through the desert and swamps west of the Niger River to Léré, Goundam, and then Timbuktu. We don't know what condition the roads are in, but they are bound to be sandy. Furthermore, both Malian and French military intelligence indicate several hundred possible jihadists along the route.

This maneuver is similar to the dozens of exercises at the French National War College. We need to weigh the pros, cons, and risks, and make a decision to convince the OCCC of our first choice. In simple terms, options 1 and 2 offer the advantage of a paved road, but without the certainty of ferries and roads along the Niger. It is a gamble. In the worst-case scenario, this would mean failing five miles short of Timbuktu. I look again at the western route (solution #3), the least appealing and hardest route, but ultimately the safest. Reading the names, I retrace the itinerary taken by the French expedition of 1894, from Bamako to Timbuktu, at the time of French Sudan. Military history in the service of operations! Léré, Niafunké, Goundam, the exhausting march of Colonel Bonnier's column, followed by that of Lieutenant Colonel Joffre, the future victor of the Marne, regularly attacked by rebellious Tuaregs who had come to raid the sedentary black population of the Niger River. While reading Niafunké on the map, I remember my grandfather, an old colonial officer, telling me on summer evenings in his big villa in Marseilles about the expeditions in far-off lands, of African spears, Chinese cannons, Moroccan sabers and muskets. I understand then and there that I will follow in the footsteps of Joffre, another Catalan, to reach the city discovered by René Caillié—"the Slave of God"—as Frison-Roche once called him. The old Bigor* is no longer with us to follow this light infantry expedition, his colonials and

legionnaires. He now lies in Marseilles, just a few feet from the war monument for the Bonnier column.

My mind is made up, we will take the western route. I call Patrick back and we agree on a two-pronged operation: Timbuktu by Léré (CAT 1 and HU) and the Gao bridge using special forces, the Malians, and paratroopers on foot. This second operation will be commanded directly by the OCCC. I will focus on Timbuktu while positioning armored vehicles and helicopters in Sévaré, to reinforce Gao if necessary. The paratrooper legionnaires are in Abidjan, and we plan to drop them to secure the city, in addition to the armored raid. The details still need to be worked out. I ask to meet their colonel in Bamako before the start of Operation Oryx—the capture of Timbuktu.

The first orders are drafted in the evening, so the campaign can begin on the morning of the 24th, in 36 hours. The goal is to occupy Sévaré and its runway and Diabaly in the North, which the jihadists seem to have abandoned. Gèze and Gout return to their CPs. We still have to ensure basic logistical support from Bamako: fuel tanks, a forward surgical team in Sévaré, near the future helicopter CP, maintenance vehicles for the sandy stretches, ammunition, and water.

In the footsteps of Joffre, a 600-mile raid through desert and marsh

My logistician looks at me questioningly. Like his CP colleagues in the hangar, he only has what he took with him on the plane: his cell phone and his notebooks. His belongings are on the floor. The campaign tables and map holders have been packed in a container that will arrive three weeks later. He will do everything he can to find the bare necessities for this improvised raid: fuel, bulletproof vests, water, and ammunition. His fellow communicator has his own worries. He has three urgent problems to deal with:

–1. Identify the CP vehicles to be positioned in what will be called the "Gèze column" to command the capture of Timbuktu from a brigade CP, capable of coordinating the armored raid, the airborne jump, and helicopter support. Once we leave, it will be too late to put in place the proper command channels and means. It is above all a question of anticipating and not forgetting anything.

–2. Distribute as much as possible communication means and satellite assets that just arrived from France, to allow the column to receive its orders and to report back on its progress in hostile territory.

–3. Quickly restore networks that are still blocked for lack of technical orders. Specifically, communications are not fully hooked up, complex architectures require some time to be stabilized and protected against attempts at intrusion. It will take a few days to get it working properly.

The whole day is spent busily preparing the operation and coordinating with theater support. Civilian and military wide-body aircraft are landing non-stop and unloading their contents. Colonel Dominique, in charge of logistics for the operation, gives an update. He has received only 6% of his supply and spare parts. Three quarters of the logistics battalion is still in France. In Toulon, the units of CAT 2 are about to cast off for Dakar aboard a Mistral-class ship, the Dixmude, accompanied by a cargo ship. He's got no tires, no spare parts. We'll have to leave with what we've got.

The column will travel 600 miles. Even without jihadist attacks, this is already a feat. I don't want to abandon equipment in the desert. First, because we have so little of it, and second, because it could be used by our enemy as propaganda. I call Gèze: "Send a team into town and get all the civilian vehicle transporters you can find. We'll pay for them." When the column went north, it was followed by these Malian vehicles and several cars full of journalists.

We finish the FRAGOs overnight and the inventory of urgent needs. Now it's time to prepare the command and control for this whole operation. We decide to establish the main CP in the hangar, while the last ones arrive, and to designate those who will join the forward CP in Sévaré for the operations in Gao and Timbuktu. Of these, half a dozen will join the tactical CP in one of the column's armored vehicles for the final coordination. Claude is in charge of the maneuver. He has anticipated my request. He knows his team perfectly and has designated his staff, ready to embark for Sévaré as soon as we have the Transalls. At the same time, communications formed a column of CP vehicles to reach Sévaré by road. Combined arms combat, wide open spaces, CP changes, anticipation of movements, we are in the thick of it.

Wednesday, January 23

Day of intense preparation and coordination with the OCCC. We consult with Grégoire. His CP is located in a large white building 200 yards away. A forward surgical team has set up on the ground floor. Satellite links are not yet established. Colonel Nicolas Rivet of the 28th communications regiment, my neighbor from Issoire, is hard at work. He needs to establish high-speed, secure uplinks with Paris, Dakar, N'Djamena, and Lyon-Mont Verdun. The CAT 1 convoys are ready to leave for the Niger bend, with

their fuel tanks. We are waiting for a third of the CP officers, who are still in France.

Thursday, January 24

We leave Bamako for the Niger bend

Denis arrived in the night with the last third. It is barely daybreak when Gèze's column leaves Bamako for the North. They will connect with the vanguard units in Diabaly and continue without stopping to the Niger River and the objective. The OCCC is providing us with information about possible enemy defenses and future missions. At the end of the afternoon, Paris asks us to accelerate and take the two cities as quickly as possible. The political pressure must be intense. Fortunately, the vehicles have already left for Sévaré and the forward CP will be operational tomorrow. I'll go there to get closer to Timbuktu. Without delay, we send the colonels a message to speed things up and clarify the mission: "seize the Niger bend." To take Timbuktu, we have three possible courses of action:

–1. A raid on the city (the one that is in progress).

–2. An armored raid and an airmobile raid, transporting infantrymen by helicopter to capture strategic locations.

–3. A raid with an airborne component: paratroopers dropped over the city.

At the same time, I point out to CAT 1 that they need to be ready to redirect their armored vehicles along the southern route toward Gao. The stage is set. Everyone understands that Operation Oryx is becoming clearer and that we need to move faster. The order ends with a quote from Monsabert: "It is the front that commands." It's up to them to push forward and let us know what they've accomplished.

Friday, January 25

"There is a valley in the Tigharghar with water year round. If they're there, that's where they'll be!"

I have been in Bamako for three days and will head to Sévaré in the afternoon. In the meantime, Grégoire has offered to accompany me to meet the chief of staff of the Malian armies in the city center, which I gladly accept. We drive through the city and I discover a carefree and lively African capital, with its traffic jams and markets. The interview with General Dembélé is fascinating. The man has a great deal of military experience and knows the northern bases well from his many years of service. He describes to us the lack of resources which hinders his military's operational capacity. In Tessalit, he saw the AQIM terror-

ists move into the Adrar des Ifoghas with new vehicles, while he had only one truck left as battalion commander to collect the monthly pay in Aguelhok. What happened next was predictable. Dembélé describes the Tigharghar massif in the Adrar mountain range: a mineral massif 50 miles by 40 miles, interspersed with valleys that have hardly any sand. In the middle of the desert, this massif contains water a few yards below the surface, the ideal site to set up a hub for traffic between the North—Algeria and Libya—and the South; between the West—Mauritania—and the East—Niger and Sudan. Nothing new, the first explorers and colonialists had already identified this massif as the den of brigands. Dembélé leans forward. His stick, his officer's wand, is placed on the carved table. He wears camouflaged fatigues and a black and white checkered scarf. "There is a valley in the middle of the Tigharghar with water year round. If they're there, that's where they'll be." I will see the general several times in Tessalit, in Gao to salute our fallen, and, the day before my departure, in Bamako, always with Grégoire.

Back to the Chinese Village. My bag is packed. Sitting on the steps of the stairs, Marie-Jo takes out his hair clipper and has taken on the air of an expert barber! He will alternate with my legal affairs officer, who is as expert as he is in men's crew cuts! With Claude, we give our verdicts on the cuts in his tent. He was able to buy a foam mattress from a local vendor, but the noise coming from the Ukrainian jumbo jets all night long leaves little chance for sleep. I leave him in Bamako with Denis and I embark with a dozen officers in a four-engine Hercules from the Belgian Air Force for Sévaré, 400 miles further east. The HU is already in place in the one-story building at Mopti-Sévaré airport. The large waiting room has been converted into a helicopter battalion CP. The small room turned into a forward CP for the brigade. To the right of the building, I meet Doctor N'G from the Sainte-Anne Hospital in Toulon. He has just set up his small field hospital, ready to receive the wounded from Timbuktu or Gao. Its readiness is a prerequisite before taking action to accomplish our objectives. Like many military surgeons, he spends his time between hospital operating rooms and operations support.

Outside, two helicopters have been reserved for medical rotations to Goundam and Timbuktu, a one-hour flight. Everything is in place, I can launch Operation Oryx. It is no longer like in Indochina where our expeditionary force was engaged in a state of extreme destitution, with apathetic support, if not hostility, from the local population. In the jungle, the wounded were evacuated on foot, and many died on the way, or had infections that resulted in amputations on arrival because there was no way

to evacuate them. There were no forward surgical teams or helicopters, or too few. I remember the scar on the arm of Colonel Barbier, a stout skirmisher officer who retired in Montpellier. “Two Viet bullets in Laî-Chau, near the Chinese border. I did not get gangrene despite the 50-hour-long medical evacuation on foot, on horseback, and by canoe, unlike my three skirmishers who died before reaching the hospital. I have not forgiven my country for that,” he confided to me in a low voice. Gangrene didn’t take his arm in 1953, but it took his leg a few years later in Algeria. I had just returned from Bosnia and his first question was how the wounded were being taken care of. We have come a long way since that sacrificed generation of unsung heroes.

From the forward CP, we follow the column’s progress, ready to join it by helicopter. There are no roads. The heavy trucks and tankers sink into the sand. The men unload the vehicles, push, pull, load, and continue their course. Niafunké and Goundam are still far away. Communications are having a hard time. It’s going to be dark soon. Gèze stops his units. They will leave the next day at 4:30 am. Paris is getting impatient. Timbuktu will not be taken on the evening of the 25th. We postpone to the 26th. In the South, special forces and paratroopers are getting ready to take the Gao airstrip after several hours of flying. I imagine the Porpoises south of Léré, looking across the stretches of sand and vegetation with night vision goggles, fearing an attack at night after an exhausting day.

“Captain, race to Gao and make contact with the paratroopers tomorrow night”

Captain Sayfa’s armored vehicles are 20 miles away, ready to burst into Gao with their Malian counterparts. A column of 500 soldiers. As soon as the Gao operation is triggered, we give them the order to link up in Gao. It’s 1 am. The sky is dotted with stars. Now it’s time to take back the initiative. In front of me, a couple miles away, I can imagine this young captain alone with his map, followed by 500 French and Malian soldiers. The order he has just received will probably be the only one like it in his life: “Race to Gao and make contact with the paratroopers tomorrow night.” He has nearly 400 miles to go. Everything depends on these young, well-trained and motivated officers. In the air, from Abidjan, the special forces and Captain Karim’s company are en route for Gao, their objective. The runway is blocked by destroyed tanks. The pilots will be able to land between two wrecks. The maneuver on the Niger bend is going well, but there is still a long way to go before reaching Timbuktu.

Saturday, January 26

There are no roads

It's 4 am, the sentry wakes me up. I jump out of my cot. The OCCC confirms that fighting has broken out at the airport in Gao. Further north, no contact with the column. I decide to go there to see Gèze again. We follow the river north in a helicopter before spotting the column spread out over a great distance. The Puma lands south of Léré. It is hot and I meet the colonel and his Malian counterpart in front of his vehicle. We agree to a radio call every two hours to track progress better. Logistics vehicles are struggling to keep up. We need to consider splitting into two detachments: the armored vehicles in front and a convoy of trucks with a protective escort in the rear. The Gazelles stay with the CAT all the way, sweeping for enemy ambushes on the road ahead and describing the terrain from above to avoid dead ends and swamps. After Léré, the terrain becomes more accessible, but the route runs along a large circular cliff, ideal for attacking the column. Intelligence reports indicate 100 to 200 jihadists in the area. The Malians in pickups will take two prisoners in a small village a little later. The locals tell us that jihadists were there recently and had planned to blend in as civilians and fight in Timbuktu. We need to accelerate and coordinate the raid with the paratrooper drop. Back at the Sévaré CP after a 40-minute flight, I gather my small team to study our plans to capture Timbuktu. Given the difficulties encountered by the column, I do not rule out postponing our assault until the next day. In any case, I exclude the possibility of transporting infantry units by helicopter between Léré and the target, especially since intel on the enemy is unclear and our special forces are not yet back with the Tiger helicopters from our HU. Putting infantrymen on the ground in the middle of the desert without support presents only disadvantages, especially in small numbers when we don't know how many enemy fighters there are.

The OCCC is waiting on me to suggest the best way of coordinating the armored raid and the airborne raid. Studying the map and the city's exit routes reveals two priority areas to be seized: the airport to the south and the northern gates, which allow for exfiltration from the city. As the column is arriving from the south, its priority will be to seize the airstrip. A choice has to be made between two solutions: simultaneous action by the two mobile groups, as soon as the column reaches Goundam, or take the risk of parachuting in CAT 4 during the night and having CAT 1 connect with them as soon as possible, probably 24 hours later or more, if the enemy reveal themselves. The worst is never certain, but it should always be anticipated and considered before deciding. The risk

that intel warns about and that can't be ignored would consist of a battalion parachuted to the ground, static, attacked by pickups equipped with heavy machine guns, and, simultaneously, the column blocked around Niafunké by mines and jihadists determined to die. For those who have studied, certainly on a different scale, Operation Market Garden, immortalized by the film *A Bridge Too Far,* an airborne operation is only worth it if ground infantry can reach them quickly. We share this analysis with Paris, and they have come to the same conclusion. I could sense from the phone call that the general staff is under immense pressure to take Timbuktu. Impatient, some even start to speculate that the brigade is suffering from the "Afghan Syndrome," or the fear of mines which inhibits vanguard elements and their leaders. For those who know the Kapisa valleys, riddled with mines on narrow roads, this made sense. And rushing on those roads was suicidal. In Mali, the width of the roads south of Timbuktu makes this much less of a risk. On this January 26th, the enemy is sand instead and the lack of reliable maps. It takes all the willpower of the Porpoises to free their logistics trucks from the sand, the heaviest of which got stuck up to 80 times. The accusation is all the more unfounded because, paradoxically, none of the leaders had been to Afghanistan—neither the colonels nor their general!

Distribution of telephones by helicopter

At 5 pm, with the OCCC, we agreed to postpone the capture of Timbuktu again, for 24 hours. In order to jump in the middle of the night, the countdown for the stick formations—the paratrooper columns in the planes—and the flight time from Abidjan (five hours) require a green light in the afternoon. The conditions were not met. I quickly understand that postponing is undesirable and that every effort must be made to reach the target by Sunday evening.

The column is now spread over 60 miles and I fear attacks on the rear. The means of communication are insufficient. I call Denis and Claude in Bamako. All satellite assets have been "pushed to the front." As a colonel, I used the same ones in Chad in 2004 with my light infantry companies from the 16th Battalion, during Operation Dorca. At the time, the aim was to patrol hundreds of miles along the Sudanese border to deter the Janjaweed (the Darfur militia) from attacking the 170,000 refugees in camps in the Ouaddai region of Chad. I had imposed a strict rule: a satellite or Morse code report every two hours so as not to lose anyone. Our Chadian allies used Turaya phones, well known to desert inhabitants and available on the civilian market. I ask my officers to find six Turaya phones ASAP that will be sent during the night via the small Pilatus liaison plane and then

dropped off in the early morning at the rear of the column by helicopter. A hack for sure, but it works.

A dike to cross the swamps

6 pm, night is about to fall and Gout gives me some excellent news: guided by the helicopters, the front units have found a hard, laterite runway. He has just arrived at Niafunké, avoiding the route at the foot of the cliff. Verborg, one of the helicopter pilots, found a dike between the swamps. He landed his Puma and checked out the width of the runway (5 yards) and the hardness of the ground before showing the route to Colonel Gèze, who was pleased about the time this would save. I met Verborg in 2005 in Ivory Coast. He was a valuable executive officer and always gave good advice. After Ivory Coast, I was not surprised to learn of his decisive role in the Libyan campaign. He commanded the night raids that destroyed part of Qaddafi's armored battalions. I knew when I saw him that the enemy had better watch out.

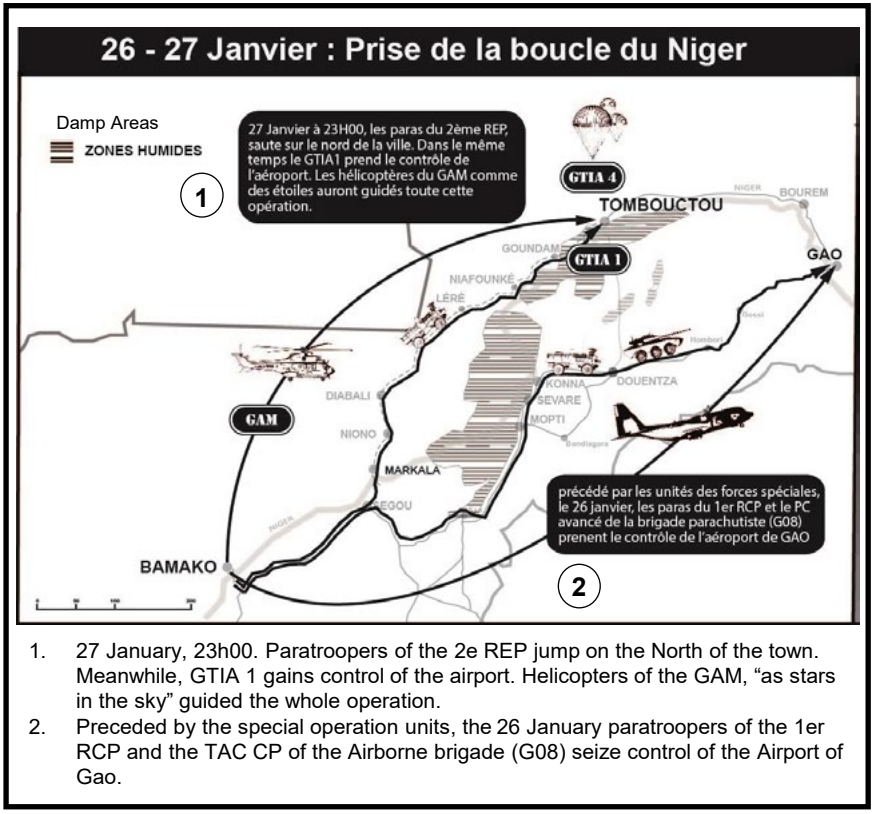
Niafunké was liberated 119 years after Joffre's conquest with his skirmishers on January 20, 1894, at the cost of 100 rebels killed. Gèze's Leclerc column rolls into town at night amidst a frenzied crowd. CAT 1 can feel the magnetic pull of Timbuktu and that the time of liberation fast approaching. Only Goundam and the martyred city remain in the way. At the same time to the east, Captain Sayfa's hussars are at the end of their 400-mile raid. They're at the gates of Gao. The lead vehicle has just fallen into a hole in the middle of the road. A smoking pickup truck and charred bodies suggest the remains of an aerial bombardment or a terrorist explosive accidentally triggered while it was being set. The driver of the vehicle is injured. The doctor in the column treats his wounds, while the armored vehicles rush to the airport and downtown to link up with the paratroopers.

Sunday, January 27

The capture of Timbuktu

At 5 am, the CAT 1 column split into two echelons: combat units in front, logistics in the rear, and helicopters above. The Turaya phones were dropped off at dawn. We are tracking their progress better. I estimate that the column has enough fuel, ammunition, and water to last two days on its own. In the small waiting room of the Mopti-Sévaré airport, we follow the progress in the North and the East toward Timbuktu and Gao. With no enemy resistance, Gèze rushes toward Goundam. The road is passable. At 10 am, we decide with Paris to take the city at night, at 11 pm, which gives time for the two mobile groups—the planes loaded with paratroopers and

the armored vehicles—to arrive together to take the city in a pincer movement, the column at the airport to the south and the paratroopers to close the gates to the desert. The paratrooper liaison officer beside me confirms that Desmeulles has received the orders from the brigade, the FRAGO. Gout insists on getting back his Tiger helicopters that were lent to special forces, and he's right. We will need their ability to observe, or even attack and neutralize, if necessary, pickups equipped with heavy machine guns.


26 - 27 Janvier : Prise de la boucle du Niger
Damp Areas
ZONES HUMIDES
1
27 Janvier à 23H00, les paras du 2ème REP, saute sur le nord de la ville. Dans le même temps le GTIA1 prend le contrôle de l'aéroport. Les hélicoptères du GAM comme des étoiles auront guidés toute cette opération.
GTIA 4
TOMBOUCTOU
BOUREM
GOUNDAM
GTIA 1
GAO
NIAFOUNKÉ
LÉRÉ
DOUENTZA
KONNA
SÉVARÉ
MOPTI
DIABALI
GAM
NIONO
MARKALA
SEGOU
précédé par les unités des forces spéciales, le 26 janvier, les paras du 1er RCP et le PC avancé de la brigade parachutiste (G08) prenent le contrôle de l'aéroport de GAO
BAMAKO
2

1. 27 January, 23h00. Paratroopers of the 2e REP jump on the North of the town. Meanwhile, GTIA 1 gains control of the airport. Helicopters of the GAM, "as stars in the sky" guided the whole operation.
2. Preceded by the special operation units, the 26 January paratroopers of the 1er RCP and the TAC CP of the Airborne brigade (G08) seize control of the Airport of Gao.

Figure 4. Seizure of the Niger Loop. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

It is time for me to join the column and command from the front. We have to coordinate the raid and parachute drops, helicopter cover, the capture of the airport, and three tactical mobile groups. As for the teams in Lyon-Mont Verdun and Paris, we are counting on them to manage other aspects that are indispensable to the overall maneuver. With a small team of officers, I leave Sévaré by Puma for Goundam, which the front of the column has just reached in the afternoon. Everything falls into place quickly. The helicopters fly over the tributaries of the Niger River, the swamps, the

herds, the Malians who greet us, the shepherds, and children. They see us heading north toward Timbuktu. For them, we represent freedom and the end of oppression by terror. I look at my map: Niafunké, Goundam and, 20 miles further on, the objective, the same as Joffre. After the Cold War in Germany, the Balkans, Chad, and Ivory Coast, here I am in Mali, this time for a blitzkrieg against a well-identified enemy. A week ago, I was pushing my kids' sleds. Today, I'm rushing toward Timbuktu. No job in the civilian world could offer me as much satisfaction. No, I do not regret having chosen this career to serve France, to live with these generous and courageous men who are committed to action. I look at Gout on my right and my old captain sitting in front of me. Neither of them would trade their places for anything, nor would Gèze and his Porpoises.

Goundam: the runway transformed into a mud bath

Goundam Airport, 2 pm: a dirt runway and a small secure building with no windows or door, the CP. Gèze is smiling. He has made it through the sands and swamps, even though his logistical vehicles are struggling. We review the maps and plans. Everyone understands the orders. The captains explain the mission to their units. Everyone checks their weapons. Our Malian friends do the same behind the building. Two prisoners are sitting in a pickup. The detachment commander is in good spirits. He is at the front of the French column and is taking full part in the liberation of his country. It's raining. A small fine rain that seeps into the ground and cools off the air, the only rain we'll get during the four-month operation. A section of three APCs approaches the runway. The vehicles are sliding on the runway, which is what I was afraid of. Gèze and I look at each other and are thinking the same thing: we can't fail now because of the rain, not when we are so close to the objective, having crossed this vast desert. We're in Africa, where things aren't always rational.

I take a minute to meet with the journalists—some well-known faces and renowned reporters. Pierre Grange, Olivier Santicchi, Didier François, Patrick Forestier, and so many others that I will see again and again. They too are on the front line. For several days, they have been following the column in old vehicles, or on our carriers, suffering from the heat and the sand.

I explain the current maneuver, Goundam and Timbuktu, and ask them not to reveal our intentions, so as not to put us in danger. They are free to record what they want, but they know that the red line is security and that, in these extreme conditions, we are interdependent. They too have tense faces, reddened eyes, and sunburned skin. They are tired but they are liv-

ing an historic moment and their reports are awaited by news offices and readers in France and around the world.

Since the beginning, this raid has been held together by the goodwill, professionalism, and resourcefulness of everyone involved. When we leave, we realize at the CP that we only have one team specialized in air traffic ground control, which is indispensable for night operations in Timbuktu. But Goundam is waiting for a Transall aircraft full of fuel, which the helicopters that are starting to land cannot continue without. At the edge of the Goundam runway, when we leave for Timbuktu, we are helpless. Luckily, we find a small team wearing different helmets, those of the air force. They have the qualifications needed to land aircraft on makeshift runways. Like us, they will be the architects of victory. With the soldiers remaining in Goundam, they mark the runway allowing their fellow pilots to land and the helicopters to leave, topped up with fuel, toward Timbuktu.

The column is back on track to the objective. The APCs spin in the mud at the start. Drivers put safe distances between each other to avoid accidents and not get bunched together, should there be an ambush. Night falls early in Mali. I position my CP vehicle behind the front armored vehicles and Gèze. He is commanding the raid to capture the airport. I monitor the overall operation. Through the window, I see the Malians greet us, illuminated by the headlights of the armored vehicles passing through the villages. I can't help but think of Colonel Bonnier and his staff: 13 Frenchmen, 63 skirmishers killed on January 15, 1894, in Tacoubao. The noise from the APC's engine prevents us from speaking. We communicate via intercom and radio headsets. My paratrooper officer is at my side. He gives a thumbs up: "General, they just took off from Abidjan. They will be on target as scheduled at 11 pm."

I can imagine Desmeulles and his legionnaires on board, squeezed into the Transall, with the two parachutes and, on their thighs, an auxiliary pack containing their satchel, ammunition, weapons, and radios. After several hours of flying, the paratroopers have only one desire: jump out of the plane. Having made a jump with them, 14 months later in Corsica, with the same configuration except for the threat of an enemy, I can safely say that this job is not cut out for everyone. The armored vehicles are en route. The air force pilots have set course for Timbuktu. They know they will be vulnerable while flying over the drop zone. They have rehearsed the trajectories and altitudes several times, a complex operation that few countries know how to do so far from their bases. They will make only one pass, under the protection and watchful eye of fighter jets and drones, a perfect pass at 11 pm sharp.

Gèze seizes the airport, Desmeulles drops onto Timbuktu

Gèze has reached the end of the road. We will approach Timbuktu together, which forces us to wait in a column to the south. Paris is following the coordination closely. With Patrick at the OCCC, we exchange information, especially since we get poor imagery from the drones once we're out in the field. The helicopters scan the city and its surroundings. Nothing is moving except for a few isolated people on the airfield. Journalists are in the column, some are embedded with the Malians. The liberation is only minutes away. CAT 1 reaches the airport via a difficult road. At 11 pm, we hear on the radio that 250 paratroopers have been dropped. It will last than ten minutes. We hold our breath. We can hear the planes and there are no shots from the city, which is reassuring. Everything next happened quickly: seizure of the airport, radio contact with the paratroopers, helicopter flyovers above and around the city. The CP vehicle stops between the tower and the main building, on which is written in large letters "Timbuktu Airport." The CAT sets up a security perimeter. We are all thinking about mines. It is important not to move around too much at night and to protect yourself in case of an attack. The Malians who know the area tell me that they are going to infiltrate to try to find out from the locals if there are any terrorists left in town. It's 2 am. Satellite dishes have been set up. The uplink is working and orders are given. I unfold my lightweight sleeping bag and, with two corporals, I doze off in a truck for two hours. Tomorrow morning, before their morning commute, all of France will learn that its armies have reached Timbuktu.

Monday, January 28

"A strategic victory for France"

7 am. The goal of this first meeting is to get a better picture of the current situation, future needs, and actions to be taken.

I don't forget that Timbuktu is only one step, "a strategic victory for France," says the media. The main CP is still in Bamako and two battalions are currently on their way to Mali—CATs 2 and 3, the Africans from the 3rd. Effective control of the town has to be organized, logistics need to be restored, the support echelon left in Niafunké had to be brought in and, above all, preparations need to be made for our next move. I have two concerns: to complete the current mission and to get guidance for future operations. I know that it will take time to shift my resources. Here, advances are counted in hundreds of miles, infrastructure is extremely deteriorated (energy, water), and security is non-existent. Time is of the essence. The race continues.

I gave the first orders outside the tactical CP. Brought over by the Malians, the deputy mayor, who has courageously stayed in his city throughout the occupation, comes to thank me. He is dressed in white with a large tricolor scarf on his chest. Neighborhood associations are waiting for the arrival of the French to ensure security and reassure the locals. The terrorists have fled. I take the chance to pick up Desmeulles by helicopter between two dunes. His chief of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Jean, spent all night checking the positions of the companies facing the city gates. Once the mission was completed, he was evacuated after fracturing his ankle from a bad fall. From the sky, the city seems calm, no crowds. White and green parachutes are lying on the sand. The legionnaires have regrouped and are blocking the exits. We meet up with Gèze, Gout, Desmeulles, and Claude, who reached the airport during the night. The tactical CP monitors ongoing operations: searches for booby traps and mines, the verification of the runway condition, obstructed by some 40 obstacles, including a disabled twin-engine plane and heaps of earth, but also the arrival of the logistics convoy and the setting up of an advanced helicopter base.

After a memorable raid, Gèze rides through Timbuktu victoriously

It is now a matter of entering the city and securing the main roads, either from the airport by vehicle or on foot from the eastern edges. I decide to entrust this mission to Gèze and CAT 1 which has just carried out a memorable raid. He is preceded by the Malian forces of Colonel S, in pickups draped with flags. It is like the liberation of Paris but in Timbuktu, a general euphoria. At the same time, Desmeulles' legionnaires have entered the city and control the eastern districts up to the center.

Gèze hesitates before leaving. Probably wondering if I should go ahead of him. I thought about it, but this victory is his. He will experience one of the most beautiful moments of his life as a soldier at the head of his Porpoises and he has deserved it. The recognition by locals in the streets is accompanied by an uninterrupted ovation, recorded by all the journalists present. I don't forget that a general's place is slightly behind to follow events, to be available at all times, and to make the right decisions on time. In Timbuktu, Gao, and Tessalit, I will always make sure that the chain of command is not weakened by dangerous absences. You have to remain humble and avoid hubris, never put yourself in a position to lose stupidly. Everyone has their place, the colonels' is in town, mine is between them and Paris and Bamako. By late afternoon, the logistics convoy has reached Goundam. It crosses the city arriving by the northern route to reach the airport and is also applauded. A beautiful gift for those forgotten heroes of history, who pushed and pulled their vehicles through these inhospitable

lands. Of course, the jihadists destroyed all the bulldozers and earth-moving machines within a 200-mile radius. One of them, a burned-out wreck, lies at the entrance to the airport. The only solution to clear the runway will be to drop a bulldozer by parachute, a capability we haven't used since Indochina and yet totally indispensable today. The combat engineers from the 17th Parachute Engineer Regiment will clear the runway in a few hours. The parachuted bulldozer reminds us of those employed by their veterans from the 31st Engineer Regiment at Diên Biên Phu. Dropped by a wide-body aircraft, we watch it descend, slowed by several parachutes, and nearly grazing the control tower by a matter of yards. On the runway, the plane is moved by three APCs which pull it slowly to the side. The combat engineers just found 500 pounds of explosives at the base of the control tower. The terrorists failed to detonate the charge, either because they didn't have time or they didn't have any detonators. The airport is in good condition, although the buildings have been damaged. At the end of the afternoon, the situation appears to be under control. The enemy fled just before we arrived. The city is liberated. It is time to quickly restore law and order to avoid possible acts of vengeance or unruly behavior, although it seems like we don't have anything to worry about. Securing certain sites, like the library, will also be part of our mission to avoid the risk of looting. But our units are not large enough to hold everything, and the Malian forces are rightfully taking charge in town. With all this underway, the return to calm is assured. So, I decide to join Denis and my main CP in a Pilatus liaison plane to prepare for the future: first Sévaré, then Bamako in the evening. I leave Claude to coordinate the end of Operation Oryx.

Before taking off, I see a section on its way back from the center of Timbuktu. All of them are happy to have been praised as victors, to have restored freedom to this oppressed population. Far from the maps of the CP, I can see up close how our operation has saved tens of thousands of civilians. I can't help but think of all the oppressed people I met in Bosnia 20 years ago, in Kosovo or later in Africa, of all those we protected in refugee camps, in bombed-out villages, without being able to ward off the war. I think about my first marksman, a great Martinican, the infantryman named Trime. Called to serve in Germany, he discovered all at once France, Europe divided in two, the cold, the military rigor and Berlin, where we spent one month a year on duty. One night, we had just finished walking for several hours along the Berlin Wall in the rural area of Lübars. It was a silent walk along the fences and barbed wire, with the barking of East German shepherds in the dim neon light that shone upon this shameful scar. As he boarded the truck, and put down his 10-yard rope

used for rescuing a possible fugitive, he broke out in tears, traumatized by the sight. He was appreciating how lucky he was to be on the right side, but felt helpless against that wall. I don't know what happened to him, but I'm sure that when he heard about the liberation of Timbuktu, he too must have thought about that sad night, about how far we've come against oppression and about the role our army has played in the service of freedom since Berlin.

Tuesday, January 29

Back to Bamako

I meet up with Grégoire in his joint theater CP, currently being transferred from Dakar to Bamako. He gives me his assessment of the situation in the region and future operations. We look forward to the forthcoming visit of the CSAS, who will guide us more specifically on his objectives. Under the CP hangar, near the runway, my staff officers meet me. I feel like I've been away for a month, but it's only been three days. Patrick just arrived from Paris. He confirms that there is political will to pursue the liberation of the Niger bend from Timbuktu to Gao and to "destroy" the terrorists in the North. With Denis and the staff, we spend the evening thinking about projection assumptions, taking into account the availability of the five battalions (CAT and HU). We review the known terrorist hotbeds and capabilities of our current and future units. We start imagining some in the South, others in the North. Until we have more guidance, we need to start planning the CP's move closer to the front. Very quickly, after looking over the terrain and the enemy, we identify Gao as the future location for upcoming operations. My chief of communications is expecting this and has begun to plan the number of vehicles and how to stagger them to relocate the brigade CP without interruption, as we did during the Belvedere exercise. He attends the meeting and says nothing. The containers with the tables, chairs, tack boards, and printers are still blocked in Istres. The company is doing everything they can. A large map of Mali is nailed to the wall. Makeshift trestles are used for the computers. The hangar is an oven. He managed to buy a couple of air-conditioners and cut a refrigerator in half to keep the servers cool and prevent them from overheating. This makeshift solution will work until the end.

Wednesday, January 30

Visit from the Chief of Staff of the Armies

The CSAS arrived last night in Bamako. He will take a tour of our installations, and it is naturally expected that I accompany him with

Grégoire. So I head to Sévaré where I will welcome him, since the runway in Timbuktu has not yet been cleared and secured for planes. At the airport, a Transall lands, followed by a government Falcon jet. It is not difficult to deduce that reconnaissance is underway to prepare for a ministerial if not presidential visit. The visit of the sites is quick: Sévaré, Timbuktu with the colonels, then Gao where there is a small paratrooper CP, just arrived from Abidjan. I discover Gao and its sprawling contours, on the edge of which, several miles further, lies another large deserted hangar filled with Malians who have regained their base. We are greeted by Xavier, the deputy commander of the 11th Airborne Brigade, and his chief of staff, Laurent. For now, the G08 (code name of the 11th's CP for the QRF) is set up in a small building facing the runway. Xavier tells the CSAS about his first contacts in town with the local authorities and the instructions given to the airborne company on site. Xavier took matters into his own hands to share site surveillance between the French, Malian, and Nigerien forces, who have just settled nearby, in the city.

This small CP is designed to conduct short operations, with light infantry on foot. It fits perfectly into the Guepard QRF, in addition to the brigade force. Placed by the OCCC in Gao, its job is to organize collaboration with our African allies, while the CP of the 3rd Brigade leads the operations, from Bamako to the Niger bend. Very quickly, the G08 CP will become the forward CP of the Serval Brigade, first in Gao then in Tessalit. Xavier is an old soldier. He also started with the mechanized infantry in Germany, in the 24th Battalion. After a few years as a non-commissioned officer, he went on to the Combined Arms Military Academy, the sister school of Saint-Cyr, reserved for NCOs and candidates from the reserve corps. As an officer, he chose the marine airborne unit, like Laurent. Xavier has been to our African and Afghan theaters several times. An experienced, pragmatic, and straightforward officer, he commands with humanity. He had closely followed the Uzbeen tragedy a few years earlier, when ten Porpoises were killed in a Taliban ambush, and he knows better than anyone that ground combat obeys certain rules. He has a strong faith, a passion for the Indochina War and a dry sense of humor. Very quickly, this officer proves himself to be a loyal executive officer with whom I will share six weeks of my life in Tessalit and, since 2013, a lasting friendship. Laurent is calm. He commanded the Airborne School and effectively leads an experienced team. His orders are always precise and well thought out. The plans are being worked out, and we are awaiting the arrival of the two battalions. We know that Gèze's CAT 1 will stay in Timbuktu until it is relieved, at which point they will return to their African bases. This will be the end of combat for our pre-positioned forces,

the first-responders. As we talked, it became clear that I would continue with the new arrivals from the 3rd Brigade, the paratroopers from the 11th, and the helicopters. However, we have not yet decided where the priority lies between the north of Adrar and the Ouagadou Forest on the Mauritanian border, from where terrorists can reach Bamako in just a few hours. We therefore consider both these hypotheses, knowing that we will quickly be supported by African battalions from the Africanled International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) which are being formed. In the evening, we learn that a Malian pickup truck has been blown up by a mine between Sévaré and Gao: 4 dead and 4 wounded. They are being evacuated by our helicopters. There are still terrorists south of the Niger River.

Thursday, January 31 and Friday, February 1

"General, we don't even have a beer to share!"

The President of France will be arriving in the coming days, a visit that must remain confidential until February 2nd for obvious security reasons. These three days of relative calm will be welcome for the brigade and used to prepare for our next move. From Bamako, we discuss the preparation of this visit over the phone with Paris. It will take place in two stages: one in the city—at the mosque and the library—in contact with the local population, and a second at the airport, more specifically focused on the forces that have liberated Timbuktu. The two French and Malian heads of state will travel together and review their troops before heading back to Bamako. I decide to join my tactical CP on the evening of February 1st to finish preparing for this high-risk visit. Indeed, everyone is seriously afraid of an armed attack in the city or that there might be a suicide bomber in the crowd, even if the security detail will be dissuasive and well organized. The runway has been cleared, and I reach the CP in a C130 Hercules, having followed the Niger River at low altitude, scaring away a few camels who are not used to hearing planes. My four colonels are there, and I tell them the latest news. The units are deployed. I designate the legionnaires from the Foreign Legion Para Rgt for the ten-man honor guard. They will present arms to the presidents as they come off the plane. It's getting dark. I meet Warrant Officer Olivier from CAT 1, a cheerful and active Porpoise. Twenty years earlier, he was in my company as a sergeant in the 92nd Inf Rgt, and we had been away together for six months in the Bihac Pocket, which naturally creates a bond between men and loosens tongues. "General, we don't even have a beer to share!" this Gaul aptly remarks. Indeed, we only have rations and water. Later, we'll get some beers, but the CAT will be gone by then.

Night visit of the city, in the footsteps of René Caillié

I suspect that, after this visit, I will have to quickly get to my CP in Bamako for what comes next. I may not return to Timbuktu. Gout thinks I'm right and is also disappointed not to have seen the holy city up close. The situation is calm. The time has come to treat ourselves to an hour's visit, the discreet reward of liberators. In a few minutes, a light convoy is formed in the dark: half a dozen very light vehicles armed by legionnaire commandos from the Foreign Legion Para Rgt. They know the city center well. They've just come back from there. Warrant Officer Cristian steps off of the lead vehicle. I understand from his accent that he is not a native French speaker. This non-commissioned officer from Romania has a look of keen intelligence. He is one of the paratrooper commandos who is known and appreciated by all. Like most of these warrant officers and chief warrant officers, he has spent his entire career with the regiment. He has the humility of a true soldier; of those who have been under fire and seen death up close. The mission is simple: cross the city, stop in front of the library, the old mosque, and especially the house of René Caillié, the first Westerner to have entered the city on April 20, 1828. When I finished reading *God's Slave*, I had promised myself to see this house. We drive through the city and I think back to the description of the explorer: "After my enthusiasm, I found that the spectacle before my eyes did not live up to my expectations. I had formed a completely different idea of this city's grandeur and wealth. At first glance, it offers only a cluster of poorly built mud houses." Obviously, the roofs are not covered with gold as the 19th-century explorers had expected. The city is made up of low houses, wide boulevards, and narrow streets, but it remains Timbuktu, a name to dream about. "The main storehouse in this part of Africa. All the salt from the mines of Toudeyni is stored there, brought by caravans on camels." These caravans still exist. We will run into them in April, stuck in the sands of Araouane between Timbuktu and Toudeyni. Time has stood still in this city. At the entrance, we pass burned-out armored vehicles, probably destroyed by airplanes or helicopters, a large black sign stands on the side: "The City of Timbuktu is founded on Islam and it will only be judged by Islamic [Sharia] law." Many small, closed restaurants and cafes have signs written "B&B" and "guest house." A few years earlier, tourists arrived in droves and kept the city alive, as in Gao and Tessalit. That prosperity, trade, and openness is a thing of the past. Terror has driven Westerners out of more and more of Africa, exacerbating poverty, resentment, war, and misery, all of which allow these parasitic networks to thrive at the expense of the population. The vehicles stop. The legionnaires advance through

the dark streets. The warrant officer asked me not to overtake them, to let them scout ahead of the group. Silhouettes pass between the walls and doors. The old mosque is there, massive, low, surrounded by small hovels. The warrant officer signals to me. He shows me a plaque on a wall where "René Caillié" is engraved. We've arrived. An old man comes out of an alley, like in the theater. He questions us. He has the keys, and we visit the courtyard, then the rooms refurbished for long gone tourists. He shows me a corner of a room under the staircase: "This is where Mr. Caillié slept." It's dark. I forget for a moment that I'm at war. I pick up a pebble from the ground, the only present I will bring back to my mother in Charente, to thank her for giving me this book and sowing in me the seeds of a dream. Gout is as moved as I am. On our way out, we see a family sitting in the alley around a small light. "Long live France! Thank you France!" The old man approaches. He introduces us to his grandson who is 5 or 6 years old. "I won't show you his back. The jihadists whipped him because he was wearing a bracelet on his wrist. Thank you. Thank you." Two young girls smile as they walk by, similar to those in the film *Timbuktu*. They have removed their headscarves, rediscovering their freedom. The warrant officer signals to me. It's time to go back.

Saturday, February 2

Visit of the President of France

Final preparations before the arrival of the Transall which lands at 9 am. We welcome the president—the head of our armed forces—who is happy to be in a Timbuktu liberated by his units. Alongside him, President Traoré and his characteristic white scarf, is also welcomed by his units who participated effectively in this raid. They are followed by Ministers Jean-Yves Le Drian and Laurent Fabius, Admiral Guillaud and, just behind the president, Army General Puga, his private chief of staff. The ministers are smiling. Jean-Yves Le Drian reminds me that a month and a half ago, I was showing him our Guepard QRF in Clermont-Ferrand. He will return twice to see his soldiers, in the Ametettai on March 7th and in Gao on April 26th.

Wearing their green berets, the legionnaires present arms. General Puga is back with his old regiment that he jumped with on Kolwesi in 1978. He knows the army and what it can ask of you. He knows men, the Foreign Legion, Africa, and war. His career was distinguished by an uninterrupted series of operations: Zaire, Lebanon, and the Central African Republic, before continuing his service in the general staffs and always for the benefit of operations.

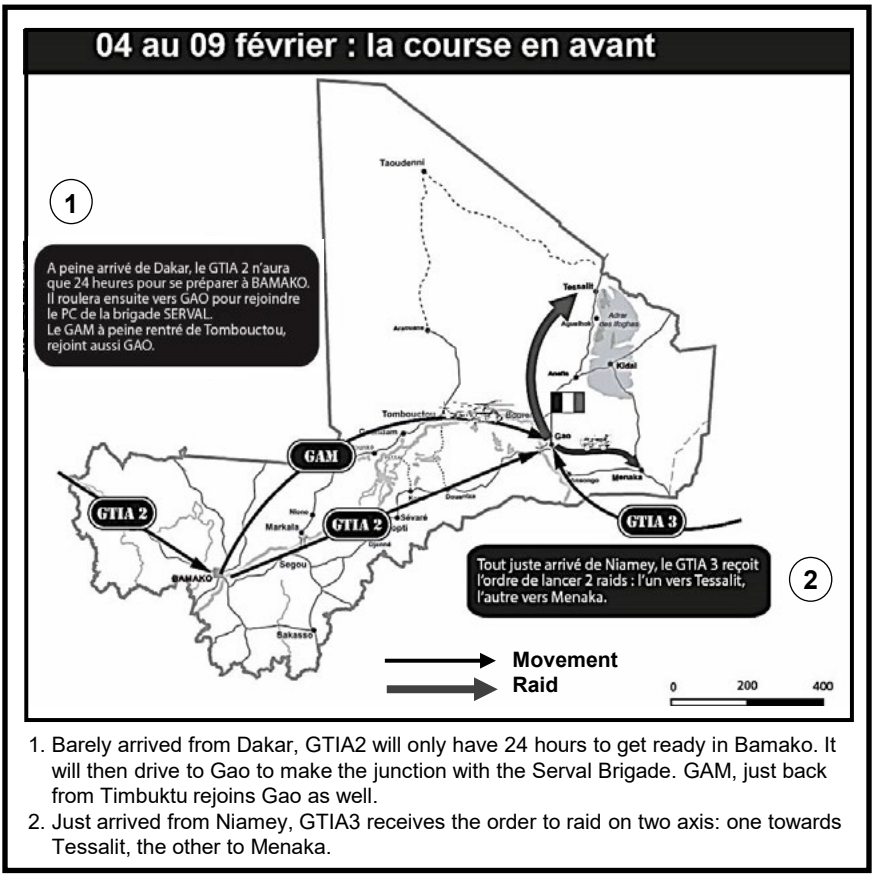
The convoy of authorities will leave the airport for the city center under escort. I will welcome them when they return to review the troops.

Before they leave, I take a few minutes to review the operations with my colonels in front of a small map of Mali. The president listens intently. He congratulates and praises us for the job well done and immediately states, in the presence of the CSAS and Grégoire, his intention to continue liberating the country. His will is clear and determined: seek out the enemy in their sanctuaries and destroy them. After a two-hour visit to the city, the president returns to the airport. I present to him the 500 men on site, lined up in front of their vehicles: first the Malians in front of their pickups, Claude and the staff, CAT 1 in front of its APCs and armored vehicles, then the CAT 4 legionnaires, the helicopter pilots, and the logisticians. The two presidents and the authorities review the troops. The men are proud and look sharp. The president's speech rises to the occasion. This official part is followed by a more informal meeting with the commander-in-chief who takes an hour to greet all the detachments and be told about their regiments and where they are stationed. Groups are formed to take a picture with the president and the minister and General Puga for the legionnaires. Claude and Rémi are at my side. They pull out of a satchel the pennant of the 3rd Brigade with its three tricolor crescents and Victory on a square of light blue cloth measuring 6 by 3 feet, the symbol of the Monsabert Brigade, and we take a picture with the president and the minister. But there's still time for one more picture. One of my faithful NCOs takes out the pennant from the local sports team in Clermont-Ferrand and holds it out in front. The president smiles, thinking that the soldiers stationed in Brive won't hold it against him. Published by the newspaper *La Montagne,* this photo will be acclaimed throughout Auvergne. It's 1 pm. The sections are back in position. I salute the authorities as they make their way onto the airplanes. The first chapter of this operation has just ended. I will now take a Transall to Bamako with Claude and Rémi. This is a race to the finish. After this three-day break, we need to pick up the pace and push our units all the way to the borders of Mali. A well-known journalist boards the plane, happy to have got a great story. "Tonight, you'll be on TV." I smile at him, "Yes, tonight they will see me. They'll know that we succeeded and my wife will know that I have a good reason for missing her birthday!"

Part 3

From Bamako to Tessalit

February 3 – February 18:
Raids and searching for the enemy



1. Barely arrived from Dakar, GTIA2 will only have 24 hours to get ready in Bamako. It will then drive to Gao to make the junction with the Serval Brigade. GAM, just back from Timbuktu rejoins Gao as well.
2. Just arrived from Niamey, GTIA3 receives the order to raid on two axis: one towards Tessalit, the other to Menaka.

Figure 5. The Race Forward. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

Sunday, February 3 and Monday, February 4

"What if they left?"

A page has been turned without firing a shot. We were supposed to encounter hundreds of terrorists. With the exception of a few prisoners, all of them fled to the North, to the desert and the Adrar des Ifoghas massif. We know that the MUJWA katibas are still lurking around Gao, the black-market hub for drugs, goods, and weapons. They are waiting, hidden in the

large sandy wadis covered with shrubs and thorns, ready to return to town to impose Sharia law and terrorize the population. The MUJWA in the South and the AQIM terrorist groups north of the Niger River. The country is so vast and the enemy so elusive, we try to imagine the two courses of action they would take and that Paris supposes as well: either make a run for the borders in small groups and wait for the French to leave, or hide out in safe havens and harass our forces.

Intel quickly confirms that the terrorists are hiding out around Gao and as far as the Nigerien border toward Menaka, In the North, we have no certainty, the borders are porous. Looking at the map with Denis and Claude, we come to the same conclusion. We will liberate Mali, but will we succeed in catching and destroying the enemy? Didn't they already leave in early February? The only way to find out is to go there, put boots on the ground, and search the area. Very early on, we knew that we were going to have to pursue this campaign with offensive surges and other raids to "plant the flag" and mark our presence in the four corners of this immense country. In direct contact with Patrick and Grégoire, we quickly decided to continue toward the East and the North, Gao and the Adrar des Ifoghas rather than the Ouagadou Forest. On the map of Africa in the Bamako CP, we are now monitoring the arrival of reinforcements and the Guepard QRF.

On February 3rd, the situation is as follows: the brigade CP is preparing to head to Gao, where the G08 is located. The CAT 4 paratroopers are waiting in Timbuktu for orders to leave for Abidjan, then most likely Tessalit in the North. The Gauls of CAT 2 from the 92nd Inf Rgt stationed in Clermont-Ferrand and their associated units, the 12 armored vehicles of the Mar Tnk Inf Rgt stationed in Poitiers, and the reconnaissance squadron from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt stationed in Angoulême have just disembarked in Dakar after ten days at sea on board the *Dixmude* PCS. They have been ordered to reach Mali—Bamako, then Gao—as soon as possible. The armored vehicles of CAT 3's 1st Mar Inf Rgt and their reinforcements, an infantry company from the 126nd Inf Rgt stationed in Brive, two 155 mm Caesar howitzers, and four 120 mm heavy mortars belonging to the 11th Mar Arty Rgt are arriving in Niamey by wide-body aircraft. With the exception of the fuel tankers, logistics is unable to keep up and the units reach their engagement areas on their own, assisted by a few civilian vehicle transporters.

For a week, the brigade's 3,500 troops and hundreds of vehicles and helicopters will be mobile, crossing Senegal, Niger, and Mali, still at high risk of accidents and losses. Armored vehicle crews, tank commanders,

and their captains will drive thousands of miles in a few days, sometimes 14 to 16 hours a day. I often thought of those 20-year-olds, driving their 30-ton AIFVs, AMX-10 tanks, and 15-ton APCs on those African roads while their fellow soldiers tried to sleep next to each other like sardines in a tin can. Taking turns with their 25-year-old NCOs, they have a tremendous responsibility.

Everything and everyone is on the move! The orders are simple: CAT 1 will hold Timbuktu and its region while waiting to be replaced; CAT 4 will leave for Abidjan and await further orders; CAT 2 and 3 will head to Gao as soon as possible, where orders await them. We called this phase "the race forward," thinking once again of Joffre's maneuver after the battle of the Marne. His idea was to get ahead of the enemy as far as the North Sea to create a favorable front, a "race to the sea" of units.

February 3rd and 4th, we watch the markers as they advance on the maps, but our minds are elsewhere, thinking about our next move. These two days of speed and wide open spaces will nourish our reflections and planning over the next two weeks. Very quickly, we identify the theater's strategic locations. We stop focusing only on the Niger bend and set our sights on the Adrar des Ifoghas and the area surrounding Gao, within a 300-mile radius—what Denis will refer to as the "Greater Gao"—including Menaka on the road to Niger. These two areas will be our final engagement areas. The Adrar and the Greater Gao will be where we will seek out and destroy our enemy. Our maneuvers to encircle and attack them will combine infantrymen on foot, armored vehicles, as well as artillery and air support, all of which will be preceded by and based on proper intel.

By February 4th, we are on the move. We have just decided that Gao will be the center of operations. Our communications officers measure the distance to be covered: more than 700 miles. Lieutenant Colonel Emmanuel has an ace up his sleeve. We have a small airmobile CP consisting of inflatable tents, generators, and satellite uplinks. By chance, or foresight, it was placed on the planes that delivered the helicopters. The CP will be flown to Gao. Some of the officers will go with it to command the brigade while the main CP is on the road and in the air, and the G08 CP goes to Abidjan and then Tessalit. Easy to say, more difficult to organize with limited time, no spare parts, dust, sand, and heat that are taking a toll on the servers. I have been back in my room for two days in the small prefab building in the Chinese Village. The logisticians have set up tents in the courtyard. Reinforcements arrive and the base is filling up. With so many people on the road, it's hard to fall asleep.

The cane of the wise, the parachute of the legionnaire, and the smile of the faithful

It's 6 am, Marie-Jo knocks on the door. He's early. I open it. Behind him, my close team: Denis, Rémi, Claude, my two staff sergeant majors, bodyguards, and my corporals. They haven't forgotten my birthday. They have prepared a pot of coffee in a tent outside, a cup of joe shared by soldiers on the battlefield, appreciated together, without any formalities. Words are superfluous. These unique moments of comradery are among the best moments of a career. They take turns giving speeches and smiling, and offer me two gifts: a folded Timbuktu parachute, a big 20-pound bag full of straps, and a magnificent African cane, covered with animal figures and the head of a gazelle at the top. My sergeant major hands it to me. God knows where he found such a thing. "This is the cane for the wise chief," the Malian seller told him.

This cane will follow me everywhere: Gao, Tessalit, and Paris. I put it next to its accomplice, the little Victory of Constantine, and they will remain inseparable for the rest of our campaign. Champagne has now replaced the coffee. It's not really the right time of day, but when is it ever. The military loves panache, marking occasions and remembering the essential. This parachute, this old cane, this glass of champagne under a tent at 6 am, these smiles, we'll never forget.

The heat is back in Bamako. The airmobile CP will reach Gao via Hercules. I decided to send Denis to coordinate the first operations with the units arriving from Niamey, thinking that I would be able to give the battalions orders for their future missions in close liaison with Patrick. Grégoire begins to coordinate our action with the gradual arrival of African troops from AFISMA and the presence of Malian battalions, between Bamako and Gao. In the evening, Denis confirms over the phone that the first armored vehicles of CAT 3 have arrived from Niamey. At the same time, Bert calls me to announce the arrival in Bamako of his column from Senegal: 140 vehicles including 30 AIFVs and AMX-10RC tanks.

I meet them at 11 pm, headlights on, in the refueling zone, all in well-aligned columns, waiting to refuel and head east.

They just drove 1,000 miles. They only have 1,000 more to go before they reach the barren airstrip of Gao. Nobody complains. The crews are busy filling the tanks. The executive officers have already left to find the bivouac areas. I recognize my Gauls from the 92nd and the Bisons from the 126th. I can see that they are exhausted. The whole brigade is on the road or in the air. At the same time, Gèze's CAT 1 is conducting Operation

Swallow around Timbuktu and found a deserted terrorist camp. Captain Karim's airborne company makes a second quick landing, called an "assault landing," on the dirt runway of Kidal, which has just been taken by special forces. While the tented CP settles in Gao, our trusted communications team is taking down the one in Bamako to move it to the East.

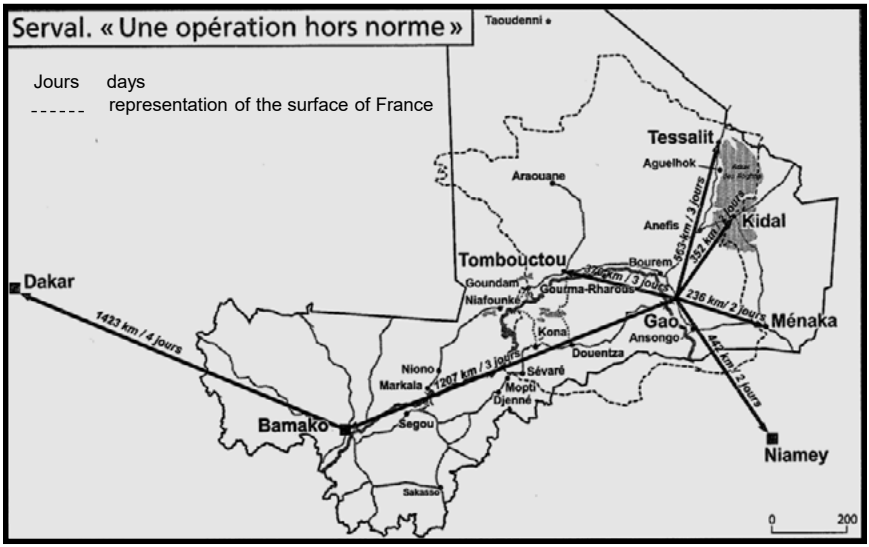


Figure 6. Serval—An Operations Beyond the Norms of Battlefield Geometry. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

Tuesday, February 5

A brigade rushing toward the northern and eastern borders

Last day in Bamako. CAT 2 has slept for a few hours. It will spend the morning carrying out formalities to re-enter the theater, basically registering personnel with HR managers from the logistics units. As surprising as it may seem, the flows of troops are so varied and sudden that we need to check records on arrival to have an exact idea of the number of fighters present on Malian soil, mainly those arriving from France, but also from different African bases. Bert comes to see me so I can fill him in on the campaign: speed, raids, and intercepting the enemy before they can recover and regroup. I don't know yet what his engagement area will be: Gao or the North. The first thing we need to do is reach the other side of the Niger bend where the enemy is. "*My idea, cut the column in half, AIFV, X-10RC in front, and go for it."* In the morning, the terrorists fired six rockets at the airport to wish Denis and Xavier a good first morning and to test the security perimeter put in place by the G08 with our Malian friends.

Invited by Grégoire, I attended a tripartite meeting between the French staff, the Malian forces, and the African contingent of AFISMA, along with General Dembélé and Nigerian General Abdul Kidar, an English speaker. The African forces already number 2,000 of the 3,000 expected, composed mainly of our Senegalese, Burkinabé, Togolese, and Nigerian allies, not to mention the 1,800 Chadians and 400 Nigeriens in the East. In the West, they occupy strategic locations between Bamako and Sévaré. The Malians reorganized their battalions in the Niger bend under the orders of Senior Colonel Dacko, the theater commander I first met on the airfield in Sévaré. All of them demonstrate a willingness to organize and coordinate, despite the insufficient resources to accelerate air deployments between their countries and Mali. Priority is naturally given to the brigade in the midst of moving from one end of the country to the other, but we must prepare the handover as we go along. I am aware of the work that Grégoire and his team will be doing in the coming weeks to formalize all this coordination between the various forces. Fortunately, he knows his contacts and their countries well. Everyone wants to be part of the effort. He will also have to synchronize these operations with the support coming from American and European allies in terms of supply and transport aircraft. We are going to fight a war at different but complementary levels, nested one within the other like babushka dolls.

The Serval Brigade's success will only be possible if units are able to work closely and intelligently with their African allies who are following the orders of their leaders, and if logistics in general and the air support campaign are geared toward actions of liberation and destruction. At the tactical level, with my two executive officers, we will conduct the same type of Franco-African meeting in Gao, bringing together Malians and Africans from AFISMA on a daily basis and, on occasion, Chadians from the North. These consultation meetings are essential between allies if only to determine what contingents are authorized to do by their governments.

It reminds me of Kosovo in 2000, when I was chief of operations of the mechanized battalion that held the center of Mitrovica and its two bridges, between the Serbian and Albanian communities. Our job was to create a buffer, control crowds, and search homes. Some 30 foreign contingents came through there: Swedes, British, Emiratis, Austrians, and more. They came to reinforce us in the northern sector, for two to four days, where things were most intense. I quickly realized that not everyone could take the detail I wanted them to. I realized that first I had to offer the contingent's leader some coffee or tea, welcome them in my operations room, and then ask the question, "What are you authorized to do?" This made

assigning missions easier. Mali 2013 was not the same as Kosovo 2000, but we still need to take the time to consult with each other and make it clear what we can and cannot do.

It's already noon, I leave the CP before going to lunch with Grégoire and our two general friends. One of my officers, returning from Timbuktu, stops me and takes out a small plastic bag from his pocket: "General, you left too quickly. I brought you this gift from the liberated Malians." A rectangle of black cloth with a tricolor trim. In the center, in large embroidered letters, is written, "Timbuktu is free. Thank you General Barrera." Unique and impactful. I will hang this friendly banner on the mosquito net of my cot in Gao and only fold it on the day of my departure from Mali. It too has joined the little Victory with her colors, her naivety of conception, as a token of gratitude. A little further on, I recognize Pierre Grange, a famous reporter for the TF1 television station. After having followed the Gèze column, he is going back to France and introduces me to Anne-Claire Coudray who is ready for Gao. He was among the first in Timbuktu. She will soon witness gunfire and combat in the streets of Gao. Another journalist who isn't afraid to stick her neck out. Meetings with journalists are always too quick, but they never leave you indifferent, and I will have the pleasure of meeting them again between two reports.

In the afternoon, I begin to have a clear idea of intentions in Paris and the areas to be avoided in order to rush north, the availability and capabilities of our allies, the means available to ensure and support my movements (helicopters, forward surgical teams, etc.). I find Desmeulles and Xavier in the hangar just back from Abidjan and Gao. We are already preparing the capture of Tessalit and operations in the North without being quite sure of how to stage the operation: parachute drop as in Timbuktu or a ground assault like Captain Karim's paratroopers, now in Kidal.

Paris asks us to move as soon as possible. Paratroopers, like special forces, are an ideal way to take over a specific location, "plant the flag" and advance the pins on the map of Mali. But we know that these actions are fleeting and ad hoc. Although they are tactically important (notably the capture of an airport or bridge when held by the enemy), they must be quickly reinforced by mobile, wheeled forces, preferably protected by armor, to carry out the main battle over large areas or in the city. Without helicopters, armored vehicles, or trucks, these airborne and airmobile tactics will have a limited effect against an organized and large enemy. We therefore need to concentrate during the design phase and always maintain a capability approach. Tessalit is our next objective. Tessalit, more than 300 miles north of Gao, where we are just beginning to gain a foothold. Tes-

salit, the center of gravity of AQIM, the dessert smugglers. Looking at the map with Claude, I recognize all these villages, these oases that I studied and followed for two years at Matignon, in the military cabinet under the orders of General de Villiers: Gao, Bourem, Almoustarat, Anéfis, Aguelhok, Kidal, and Tessalit. Now it's time to go and find them. By satellite, I instruct Denis to prepare a raid to the North with the first arrivals from Niamey. I reread and finish the FRAGOs during the night. The column has to leave the next day to reach Tessalit by the 8th; the medical evacuation helicopter will join us during the night.

Wednesday, February 6

Take Tessalit and Menaka

Find the sand fatigues

In Gao, three rockets land next to the airport, fired by terrorists a couple of miles away as a way of welcoming the leading elements of CAT 3: armored vehicles, fuel tanks, two Caesar howitzers, and combat engineers, ready to clear landmines. No one has taken this road yet, the Trans-Saharan. The orders are clear: seize the base at Tessalit, an abandoned modern barracks west of the city, a nearly 1 square mile zone, made up of small buildings and a well on the edge of an airstrip.

CAT 2 is now on the road in the Gourma Province. It is racing for Gao, as is the rest of CAT 3. It is time to begin the next phase. Before taking off in the middle of the day with the Pilatus, I check two points of unequal importance: the reinforcements to come from France and the sand-colored fatigues. After the first losses by mines, for the moment suffered by the Malians, I note that with a single company of engineering deminers and an artillery group limited to two Caesars, I will lack support. Originally planned in the Guepard QRF, the artillerymen and combat engineers are ready to deploy. Some of them almost embarked in Toulon. I believe that I will certainly need them and confirm these additional requests, well aware that manpower is limited and that transportation by aircraft is costly. At the same time, I notice that some units have not yet received their sand fatigues. They are wearing green camouflaged fatigues which are thicker and therefore hotter. I tell my logistics team to locate the container with the missing 1,500 fatigues and transport it to Gao, before others take care of it. After a four-hour flight, I land in Gao at the end of the afternoon, welcomed by Denis and Xavier, my two assistant colonels, whom I would later refer to as the "Southern Deputy Commander" (Gao) and the "Northern Deputy Commander" (Tessalit), the green beret and the red beret, the legionnaire and the paratrooper.

The installation is rudimentary: a large empty hangar and two small buildings on the edge of the runway, which will be used to house the brigade's CP. The living quarters for the command staff are on the right, next to the G08 paratrooper CP which will later be replaced by the helicopter unit CP.

In the meantime, the tents of the airmobile CP have been installed. Officers are already at work, liaising with Paris, Bamako, Gao, and Abidjan. Crates of field rations and bottled water have been stacked alongside a building. Helicopters have begun to land from Timbuktu and Sévaré. On the other hand, there are no toilets or showers, no water, and a wide open space in front of the buildings. For an infantryman, this is a huge area that will require a permanent security perimeter. The African detachments hold all the intersections within a three-mile radius, but we quickly set up snipers and sentries on the rooftops facing the open space. Later, we'll dig long ditches to prevent vehicles from infiltrating the base.

As soon as we arrive, we confirm the raids in progress for Tessalit on the morning of the 8th. We discuss the best way to deploy the CAT 4 paratroopers: by parachute jump or by plane if the runway is operational. The ground, strewn with stones, is much harder than in Timbuktu. We opt for air transport and at the same time to set up the G08 CP there, now that the brigade will install its main CP in Gao.

Recognition by Gao's elected leader and the Panther tank commander

We are just finishing getting all set up in the small control tower building, when a Gao elected official approaches my bodyguards who are busy cleaning the rooms in a cloud of dust. He carries a bag containing couscous and mangoes. Smiling, he puts it down on the terrace. "This is for you, to thank you for protecting us. We need you to stay and drive out the jihadists." Together with the sergeant major and Marie-Jo, we thank him for his gesture. Seeing him leave, I measure the gratitude of the people in danger, of those who have suffered and who still feel threatened. Exactly 25 years earlier, I had observed this gratitude in the actions of an old German in Baden-Württemberg. As executive officer of a company of mechanized infantry, I had just finished camouflaging 150 men and 15 tracked armored vehicles in the forest and farm buildings behind a ridge line. For several days, we had been conducting a free-field exercise with our German colleagues—other infantrymen and a squadron of Panzer Leopards. In front of us, an American armored battalion simulated the enemy, in other words, the Soviets. At that time, West Germany was covered with bases and protected by thousands of allied tanks. A10 tank destroyers and Phan-

toms flew over our positions trying to locate us. Soaking wet and freezing, we had set up the armored CP in a barn for a few hours. No sooner had we settled in than a beautiful blonde girl joined us with a tray of cakes and two large thermoses of coffee, followed by her grandfather, the owner of the farm. The gratitude of these Germans had touched my conscripts and me. Sitting in the tank CP, the old man took my arm and repeated "*Danke*" (thank you). He had just put down my radio headset that I made him try. History and the memory of the war had caught up with him. When he saw the tracks, the armor, and the fatigues, he started talking and telling us about his life. The grandfather had ended the war as Panther tank commander on the Eastern Front against the Soviets. He knew war well and savored a priceless peace.

Night has now fallen. With Denis, we are invited for dinner by the small paratrooper staff who have finished their mission in Gao. We anticipate their departure soon. We are far from imagining that we will see them again in Gao in April, back from two months of operations in Tessalit.

Thursday, February 7

Crocodiles in the Anefis Desert

Tripartite meeting with the Malians of Senior Colonel Dacko, the Africans of AFISMA, and the Nigeriens. We learn that Malian forces are regrouping to join Gao where the contingent is expected to increase from 300 to 600 men. The Nigeriens are settled in Gao and closer to their border in Ansongo. We explain to them that the brigade will be arriving soon and that operations will continue. On the Trans-Saharan, the column continues northward. They plan to set up camp in the Aguelhok region, south of Tessalit. The convoy of nearly 70 vehicles is covered in dust. It travels through valleys of black stones to the desert sands under a blazing sun. Despite a few rare breakdowns, the Porpoises of the 1st head north under the orders of Lieutenant Colonel Loïc, chief of operations, and Captain Augustin, commander of the Crocodile Squadron, AKA the Crocos. They cross the Anefis Desert, guided by the Tuaregs of the Malian army—CAT 8 commanded by Colonel Gamou.

At the same time, CAT 1 is conducting patrols around Timbuktu. The ferries have been repaired, which is very much appreciated by the local population. Gèze expects to receive the order to withdraw to Bamako, N'Djamena, and Dakar. His Porpoises from the 2nd Mar Inf Rgt, AKA "the Camels," will go to Gao, then Tessalit. At the same time, in the inflatable tents, we are preparing another mission to reach Menaka in the MUJWA-infested area, near the Nigerien border. The hussar [light cav-

alry] squadron of paratroopers who carried out the Sévaré raid in Gao on January 26th and 27th is about to leave for a new deployment several hundred miles away. The armored vehicles are heading north and soon east. Once the Tessalit camp is reached, Xavier will return to his new outpost. Well informed of our raid, his friend from special forces warned him of an action during the night. Reinforced by some of the brigade's paratroopers, they will reach the deserted camp and the Tessalit runway by plane during the night, a few hours ahead of CAT 3's Porpoises. CAT 2, equipped with AIFVs, continues its rapid progression, followed by CP trucks between Sévaré and Gao. The whole brigade is on the move from Timbuktu to Tessalit. In Bamako, the logisticians are concerned about their ability to sustainably supply the column heading north. Everything is complicated in the North because of the distance, the heat, and the road conditions. Fuel reserves are limited in Gao, especially since the special forces helicopters stopped by at night to refuel from our supply. In the evening, we give the last instructions to the hussars who will leave for at least six days. The units barely have time to arrive before they are back on the road. Our equipment is suffering and we already lack spare parts and components, but it is impossible to stop now. We have to surprise them, show them that we go wherever we want, however, and whenever we want. It's late. Marie-Jo and I will sleep in the small building of the destroyed control tower. He unfolds a cot in a small room on the ground floor, near a terrace that overlooks the HU tarmac and the helicopters that have just arrived. I put my two bags against the wall to the right of the bed. The small window is covered by a piece of parachute which does little to prevent dust or sand from entering and covering everything with a fine film of yellow. The bodyguards are sleeping next door. One of them has set up his cot in the open hallway right in front of the doors to protect me in case of an incursion. At the top of the stairs, on the roof, snipers look out day and night over the open expanse. I go to see them from time to time to break their monotony.

Friday, February 8

First suicide bomber attack in Gao

Armored raids near Algeria and Niger

Gao will not be quiet for long. A young suicide bomber blew himself up on his moped a few yards from a checkpoint manned by Malians at the northern entrance to the town on the road to Bourem—the "northern checkpoint." The bomb killed the terrorist and slightly wounded a soldier nearby. Apparently, the rocket attached to his back did not explode. A few

minutes later, as on the morning of the 5th, we hear muffled explosions, probably more rockets fired at the airport. The column has arrived in the Tessalit camp after passing through the village. They encounter the small special forces detachment and the two paratrooper sections, who passed through during the night. The other armored column is progressing quickly: Ansongo, soon Menaka.

After Tessalit and Menaka, we will hold the two ports of entry, which are also the two centers of gravity of the AQIM and MUJWA terrorist groups. Put simply, we are standing in the middle of the two hornets' nests, with one foot in each. We will soon know if they are still there or have fled across the borders. This first attack tells me that the asymmetric war, the war of cheap shots, has just begun. However, one thing puzzles me, as in Gossi a few days earlier, the enemy is attacking the weakest link: the Malian contingent. The exchanges we have with our African allies are therefore extremely important to fully understand and coordinate our actions. Various sources of intel inform us that the base will soon be bombarded by guns installed between Gao and Bourem. The Gazelles take off to search for them. No luck.

I decide to go to Tessalit by helicopter, to find the men of the northern column and see for myself the distances, the condition of the roads, and the camp. Take-off is scheduled for early afternoon. Previously, I had asked my communications officer to inform the journalists in Gao that I would be giving them an update on the situation and the missions in progress, an appointment that I would repeat regularly to inform them and suggest possible reports depending on the operational constraints and the instructions received. Liseron Boudoule, Willy Bracciano, and G. Brisbeck board the Puma to take the first images of a liberated Tessalit.

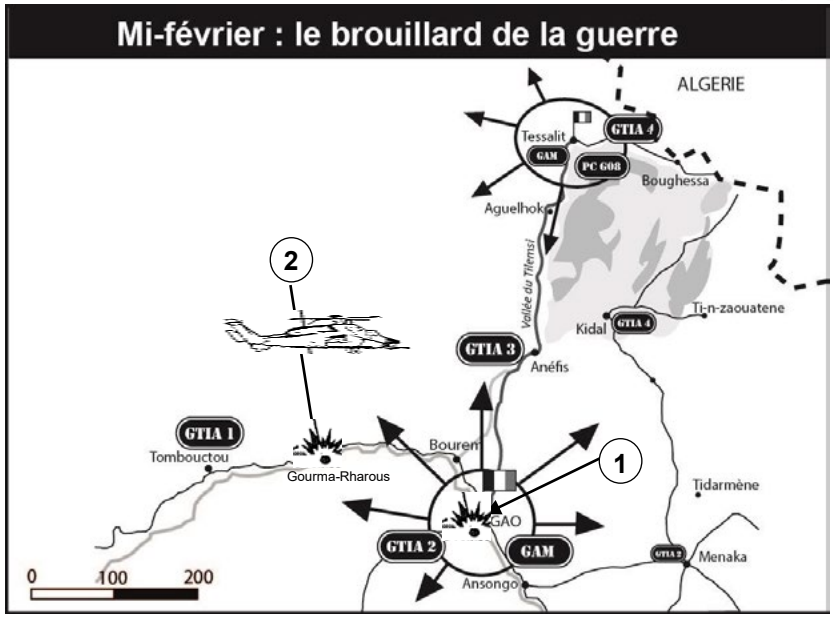
We leave Gao at 1 pm for a two-hour flight at low altitude. After the Anefis Desert, we go up the Tilemsi valley which borders the western flank of the Adrar des Ifoghas. This 20 to 30-mile wide valley stretches over 250 miles and is a contact zone between tectonic plates, a great Trans-Saharan route that has long linked Mali (formerly Sudan) to North Africa. This valley in the shape of a glove's finger benefited from a wet Neolithic period which irrigated bushes, forests, and game, allowing men to live there, well before the kingdom and the Songhay empire of Gao. The area is rich in prehistoric remains and deposits, rock engravings, and human history. We now fly over villages, camps, and frantic camels, guarded by Tuaregs and Arabs, in the same places where their ancestors raised cattle and hunted antelopes. The desert has taken over. The Algerian massifs of Hoggar, the Malian Adrar des Ifoghas, and the Nigerien Aïr populated my imagination as a child, when I read the stories of the meharists and explorers lost in these seas of sand, these unreal and scorching massifs.

With Issoufou, my Nigerien friend, son of the desert and duty

I leave my brigade for a moment and reminisce about Coëtquidan 30 years earlier, about Saint-Cyr, the school of ideals, service, and tradition. I remember Issoufou Marafat, my Nigerien friend with whom I often talked about the desert and camel cavalry, he who had left the sun for three years of Breton rain. I enjoyed his finesse and his company. We had shared everything and, as is often the case with our African St. Cyrien classmates, we had forged strong bonds of friendship and genuine brotherhood, over the course of hardships and night marches.

On his last leave, before going back to his country for good, Issoufou gave me a gift from his country: a small, colorful, and decorated Méhariste camel saddle. I had promised to come and see him in his desert post in the North of Niger, at the time when I was destined to join the mechanized infantry in the foggy East, not being able to choose the camel cavalry which has since disappeared from the ranks of our army. In the midst of the Cold War, I had chosen to join the infantry of trench warfare, guarding our borders with tanks and armored vehicles, regretting inwardly to be born too late to have taken part in the great Saharan expeditions of yesteryear. Thirty years later, I am in Mali. We fly over the Tilemsi, the valley that leads to the Hoggar, and Issoufou is in my thoughts. I never went to see him. Issoufou was killed shortly afterwards, leading his company in the pursuit of rebels and smugglers along the border in the desert. For two hours, we fly over sand and stones. On my right, the foothills of the Adrar, both majestic and terrifying, an area of valleys, caches, ridges, and cliffs. A perfect place to hide. From a distance, I see this mass which never seems to end. On my left, the exact opposite. The landscape is flat, sometimes barely hilly, the Timetrine Desert, the Southern Sahara. The terrain has changed. It is nothing like Bamako, Timbuktu, and Gao. Here, everything is hot and massive. The terrain and the climate are ruthless. We land at the end of the runway, next to the Tessalit camp. The runway is paved, but in very poor condition. It will not withstand the pressure of wide-body aircraft which will opt to take off and land quickly on the parallel dirt runway. The ground is littered with destroyed equipment and rubbish. The buildings are empty, the doors are broken. I find my Porpoises from CAT 3, the Bigors and their two Caesars, and the nurses, all looking exhausted from a long voyage. They haven't slept much but met their objective. On the morning of the 8th, their Malian guides—decked in camouflaged fatigues, scarves on their heads, and Kalashnikovs on their shoulders—are with them. These Tuaregs are from the region and allegiant to Bamako. They showed them the way without GPS or compass. The journalists who

accompanied us film the scene and edit their report at the foot of a Puma to send it by satellite to France, before heading back to Gao at night. I look at this big wall that surrounds the camp. "*Fortunately, the walls can't talk. Here, the jihadists surrounded and murdered the Malian soldiers"* a few months ago; and yet we are not afraid.



1. 8 and 10 February: Suicide attacks at the north entry of town and at the police station.
2. 9 February: interception / destruction of pickups on the Niger River.

Figure 7. Mid-Feb—The Fog of War. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

On arrival, Denis greets me at the edge of the runway. Good news, the eastern column has reached the airfield in Menaka, accompanied by a Malian detachment. On the road, the inhabitants cheered the French, but in town, they see vehicles flying the NMLA flag, and the Malians reacted by taking prisoners, considering them enemies. The situation is tense. We're spread as thin as we've ever been, with outposts 300 to 600 miles apart. We need to widen the security perimeter around Gao to avoid taking fire like sitting ducks at the enemy's pleasure, who is certainly lurking at the gates of the city. At the same time, we need to ensure that we have medical facilities in place to compensate for longer evacuation times than in Afghanistan, because the distances are so great. Each outpost has at least one transport helicopter, but we are running low on fuel. We are impatiently

awaiting the road convoy from Bamako. We know we are vulnerable tonight: Timbuktu, Tessalit, Menaka, and Gao. We need a good night's rest, then we'll make our next move.

Saturday, February 9

Jihadists intercepted by armed helicopters

The night was short for everyone. The first tanker trucks have just arrived. We are in constant contact with the CP in Bamako, which has taken over ground operations from Paris. Things are falling into place there as well. We must prevent a new conflict from erupting, between the NMLA and the Malian unit in Menaka. Obviously, the MUJWA terrorists have left the area, making way for the Free Azawad Party, but to our allies on the ground, they are the same people with a different flag, and they consider these ten or so armed pickups to be hostile. The situation takes a few hours to defuse. The pickups retreat and the inhabitants triumphantly welcome the French armored vehicles and their allies in the city. We sense that everyone is antsy for battle and a single spark would suffice for our units to get their first taste of it in Mali. Communications is working wonders. In a few hours, they have installed everything. Everyone has found their place, connected their computer, and is ready for unsuspected action on the Niger River. Indeed, in the afternoon, we received reports of a discreet regrouping of terrorists between Timbuktu and Gao south of the river. Not all of them have managed to overcome this natural obstacle. They must flee north to avoid being located and destroyed.

The ferries were forbidden to cross the Niger until the Malian army arrived in the Gourma region. It's a race against time, and Senior Colonel Dacko knows it. He has committed to hunting the resistance south of the river as soon as he gets his reinforcements. In the meantime, the terrorists have abducted a smuggler's family and are forcing him to cross the river with their pickups. A Mirage patrol confirms the presence of suspicious vehicles in the village. Two armed Tigers take off loudly from Gao and rush northwest in tactical formation, at very low altitude, to avoid being detected. Night has fallen, but their thermal sensors indicate three stationary, armed vehicles. Once identified, they are destroyed outside the village with a 30 mm chain gun and rockets. Before returning home, the Tigers will refuel in Timbuktu, where Gèze has a tanker. Tomorrow morning, the logistics convoy will be in Gao, and our helicopters will no longer be limited.

This destruction is the brigade's first fight. It shows how important it is to have a network of informants everywhere to alert us, combined with

a rapid response. Our intel hussars and Malian friends have been trying for several days to formalize how inhabitants can raise the alarm. The terrorists have destroyed the cell towers to avoid being easily informed on, but a few light satellite devices are enough to warn us. Nine years earlier, with our Chadian allies, we did the same thing in the Ouaddai. Night falls on Gao. We expect to take some fire. All the sentries are on the lookout. The night shift at the CP is ready to respond.

At 11 pm, a suicide bomber blows himself up at the northern checkpoint. He was stopped a few yards from the Malian-held post. There too, the sentries have a keen interest not to fall asleep in their combat dugouts. I go see Dacko to offer him our help. We send up two helicopters over the area to intervene if necessary.

Sunday, February 10

First street fights in Gao

The brigade in the fog of war

We have entered the fog of war. It is impossible to know when, where, and how we will be attacked. Our patrols are scouring the city and the surrounding area to counter any hint of attack. We have placed lookouts with night vision googles facing the Niger River from where light boats loaded with terrorists can come.

I made the decision to reinforce the checkpoints at night with a platoon of three AMX-10RC light tanks with thermal sensors and heavy weaponry. At the same time, I had mortars placed in battery to light up the northern edge of Gao with flares in a matter of seconds to help our Malian allies. Mortars and tanks will soon be used effectively, to the greatest relief of Dacko and his brave NCO who holds his post by stopping men loaded with explosives just in time. I have often thought of this leader who was fighting for the freedom of his country, to save his own skin and that of his men. I have only one regret: not to have met him to shake his hand and congratulate him. This man was a hero, and we did not leave him to fend for himself. In these circumstances, the brotherhood of arms takes on its full meaning.

It's time to loosen the vice and remind our journalist friends in town about safety instructions. They are easy targets, potential hostages.

My communications officer closely monitors their requests and questions, but also their locations in makeshift hotels in the center of town. In the middle of the day, I walk around the airport to see where it is located in relation to the city and understand our security setup. Then, I visit the Nigerien battalion a few miles away near the river and a school where a

teacher was killed by terrorists. Lieutenant Colonel Gabriel welcomes me. He went to Saint-Cyr, and we think alike. His men are disciplined and look proud. He has several artillery guns and armored pickups. They have brand new equipment (bulletproof vests and helmets). They will be an effective element in the defense of Gao. I don't have time to finish the tour. We hear machine gun fire in town. Without waiting, we head to the CP.

These terrorists know how to fight, the French and the Malians too

This time, we are fairly quickly immobilized by one of our patrols, which is stuck in a crossfire with a handful of journalists nearby, right in the city center. Several terrorists managed to infiltrate the town, were quickly denounced by the population, and attacked by Malian soldiers. I can send in the Guepard APC company that carried out the raid on Timbuktu and which has just reached Gao, as well as one of the two AIFV companies, just arrived from Dakar. The enemy is estimated at 10 to 15 terrorists and has taken cover behind the thick walls of the police station. They are shooting in the streets and the main square. I send two columns, one to help the Malians destroy them and protect our journalists, another to protect the hotel where the other journalists are gathered and evacuate those who wish to go. Both will accomplish their missions. Warrant Officer Morgan's Porpoises were the first to fight, with hand grenades and anti-tank rockets, to kill the attackers and reach the journalists and the hussars in town. Two soldiers were slightly wounded.

In the late afternoon, the first-floor walls of the police station are blown out by a violent explosion. We'll find out later that a suicide bomber had detonated his several pounds of explosives while inside the building. His terrorist friends are holding the area and have succeeded in immobilizing a group of Malians that can no longer move lest they risk being destroyed. Gout is by my side. He is on the radio with a Tiger which has just been updated on the situation and can help the group get free. Shooting in the city with a helicopter is a serious risk, and I don't want to hurt any civilians. A few short bursts of 30 mm shells along the police station walls are enough to neutralize some of the attackers. The others manage to escape under the cover of darkness. We hunt them down in close liaison with Dacko's men. It was a busy day, with the first combat on the ground and the first casualties. The city is too big to seal it off completely. These men, mostly light-skinned, infiltrated without equipment. They got their weapons and explosives from caches. They know how to fight and maneuver. On my return, I interviewed the warrant officer, an experienced leader. He was struck by the terrorists' movements, silently changing positions, trying to catch him off guard. These Porpoises fired and maneuvered like it was a drill, calmly and at very close

range. The NCO's testimony is accurate and deliberate. In a few days, he will leave Gao for Adrar and fight with the same efficiency.

In Menaka, the NMLA has left the area. The armored vehicles are back in town.

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, February 11-13

Operation Python

These days we spend preparing missions to push our observation lines and patrol perimeters ever further: 5 miles, then 10 miles from Gao with the newly arrived armored vehicles. CAT 2 and 3 are not yet complete. In Tessalit, the armored vehicles and the logisticians are holding the outpost, but to be sure that they can supply them, Bamako has asked that part of the February 8th column be sent back down to Gao. We are preparing future missions: clearing the Gao-Bourem axis to the north, along the Niger, cleaning up the islands in the river from which the terrorists leave at night, and studying the possibility of positioning the paratroopers from the small G08 CP and CAT 4 in Tessalit, the same ones who are now in Abidjan. At the same time, the Malians have banned crossings of the Niger in the long traditional pirogues, also known as pinnaces. It is clear to me that operations will be long in the Niger bend and that we will have to seek out the enemy in the Adrar massif before withdrawing.

This prospect of simultaneous fronts pushes me to ask for capacity reinforcements. I need two more howitzers, or at least four so we can fire at the same time in Gao and Tessalit if needed—which will happen at the beginning of March—but also more combat engineers to clear mines and fuel for the armored vehicles and helicopters.

On the evening of the 12th, I meet with Claude and his staff officers. In liaison with their counterparts in Bamako, they have prepared the orders for the next four missions that will orient the brigade's maneuver: liberate Bourem with CAT 2 and search the Niger Valley on their way south to Gao, reinforce Tessalit where the CAT 4 paratroopers have just arrived by plane, disengage Gèze's CAT, still in Timbuktu, and replace it with a squadron that has arrived from France, and then supply Tessalit with logistics convoys over land. The small team of planners and tacticians who are drafting the orders are under a lot of pressure. They spend their nights checking their feasibility.

On the 13th, we coordinate with the Malians and the Africans before Operation Python: CAT 2 will head north through the desert, then make a surprise turn left toward the river and conduct an armored raid on Bourem.

I stop in at the field hospital to visit the wounded. I meet the sergeant from the 2nd Mar Inf Rgt. He tells me about his skirmish with the swift jihadists at the police station. With the grenade shrapnel now removed, his mind is set on one thing: getting back out there with his section. After this visit, I walk around the runway to see the first two CAT 2 units that have arrived: the AIFV infantry company from the 92nd Inf Rgt and the AMX-10RC squadron from the Mar Tnk Inf Rgt. I note: "*Visited the units, cots around the AIFVs, smile of the Gauls, proud to have traveled 1,500 miles and to have fought."* The armored vehicles are lined up in a column. The tents have not arrived. The cots are arranged in two lines and topped with their mosquito nets. There are no toilets or showers. We wash ourselves with a bottle of water from the well which is scarce. Latrines are dug, and stretched fabrics are used for privacy until the equipment arrives. Fortunately, there is no shortage of bottled water and field rations. There is no electricity. Everyone limits themselves to basic needs.

At the CP, the orders are ready for CAT 2 and the helicopters. With Denis and Claude, we are thinking about our next move: the Adrar. The question of the CP arises and we plan to have a forward CP in Aguelhok, in front of the valleys of the Adrar: Ametettai, In Tegant, and Terz. As with Gao a week ago, Claude and his head of communications are already thinking of splitting their team in half. Always anticipate. It's already 11 pm. The generator is running non-stop next to the hangar. I have no windows or door, like everyone else. A sleepless night awaits us.

Thursday, February 14 and Friday, February 15

"Free Bourem, search and demine the banks of the Niger"

Operation Python has begun. CAT 2's armored infantry vehicles and the Malian units left the camp heading north, toward the Anefis Desert, as if they were going to Aguelhok and Tessalit; but, at the last moment, the column turned west and took Bourem before reaching the northern checkpoint of Gao, where the Malians and Nigeriens will stop any attempts at infiltration. It is unlikely we will stop any terrorist pickups in the area. They must be camouflaged, buried, or already gone north. Nonetheless, the main objective is to liberate Bourem, reinstall Malian authority, and demine the area between Bourem and Gao, where the morning rockets directed at the airport are coming from. Installed on makeshift ramps, they are fired by electrical devices connected to cell phones.

This operation is the first to be conducted autonomously by Bert and his Gauls since his arrival. With Denis, Claude, and the staff, we prepare to head to the Northern Zone. Without knowing the enemy's location,

our team's main concern is one of technical feasibility: should we settle in Tessalit or Aguelhok, less far and closer to the massif, or in Kidal, further south but closer to the escape routes that lead to Niger? Officers spend hours studying their maps and aerial photos to identify the best course of action.

Grégoire informs me of the next day's visit of the operations officer from the general staff of the armies. Arriving from Bamako, he will spend the night in Gao and will leave on the 16th.

First operations in the Adrar: the search for the hornet's nest

On the 15th, Xavier calls me. He is planning the first sorties from the Tessalit camp with the paratroopers who are now in the North. His team consists of the armored squadron which arrived on the 8th, the Crocos, a dozen tanks reinforced with infantrymen from the 126th stationed in Brive, and combat engineers from the 6th. This mixed unit will make a name for itself as the protector of infantry companies and paratroopers lacking armor and long-range firing capabilities, except for some anti-tank missile launchers. In these wide-open spaces and deep valleys, the coordination between the infantry and armored vehicles will become paramount, simply amounting to a question of life or death. Xavier wants to expand the security zone around Tessalit. Half of the helicopters are with them, but the planes and convoys have not yet delivered enough fuel to allow for many long-distance rotations. Xavier and I also know that troops transported by helicopter far from their base must be defended and reinforced without delay, especially when they are in hostile territory. I remember the stories of veterans who described repeated assaults by FLN katibas against French companies that had just been set down, nightmarish scenes for these isolated infantrymen. With five Pumas, the carrying capacity is 40 armed infantrymen, which is too little to carry out autonomous missions that cover extensive ground. To make an impact, we would have needed a dozen additional maneuvering helicopters or larger helicopters, and also run the risk of walking into the hornet's nest. There were several hundred terrorists holed up in the Adrar.

We finalize our plans in the morning with Claude and his team: we plan a short week to clean up the outskirts of Gao and Tessalit and, starting on the 22nd, a centralized operation in the Adrar with two of the three CATs. Communications evaluates the resources needed to carry out simultaneous sorties on two fronts and the logisticians forecast the number of weekly convoys and especially the daily consumption of fuel and water. The AIFVs approach Bourem.

At the end of the afternoon, we receive the two generals for a short visit in Gao. Since the beginning of this operation, the CSAS and his operations officer have been under intense pressure from the president and the prime minister to accelerate, to go further and faster. This translates into orders and exhortations from the OCCC to free Mali's cities as quickly as possible, despite the logistical limitations.

Saturday, February 16 and Sunday, February 17

The visit continues with a series of exchanges at the brigade's CP, a trip into town, then to the desert, at the gates of Bourem, where the column of vehicles is advancing with caution. For his first operation, Colonel Bert decided to ask locals about the presence of the enemy and mines, to avoid losing our element of surprise for the few terrorists left in the area. Python will then be followed by much more remote, fast, daring, and unpredictable raids for the enemy east of Gao. Two weeks later, destructive raids will take place against the MUJWA katibas, based on better intel than we had for Python.

The enemy is gone; the Adrar is empty

At the same time, operations continue in the North. Around Tessalit, Operation Panther was also unsuccessful. A group of special forces made a helicopter incursion into the Adrar and, like the airborne sensors, they detected no presence in the massif, as if the terrorists had all left Mali. Different options are on the table to pursue the hunt, and we discussed this before the Transall left.

Based on the latest reports that have come up empty-handed in the North, we legitimately feel that Paris has doubts about the outcome of the operation. The reconnaissance missions confirm the absence of any human presence as seen and heard from the sky. Yet, in Gao, the locals tell us that they are still around the city, lurking under the thorny trees of the large desert wadis, waiting to return once our troops have left. In the North, my intelligence team shows me aerial photos of empty but real combat dugouts for artillery and vehicles.

Thirty-six hours to draft and send an operations plan

I gather my loyal Clermont-Ferrand team, those who were at the Belvédère exercise. They need guidance to design a more elaborate maneuver, to anticipate the days and weeks ahead. They are all present in this small, overheated room in the hangar. The video projector is on, as is the fan. It's over 105° F. The map of Mali is pinned on a white wall: Niger, Timbuktu, Gao, Menaka, Kidal, and Tessalit. I tell them my intuitions and my "orders." I gather that we have 36 hours to provide Bamako and Paris with a reason-

able and structured vision of the succession of operations to be carried out. Doubt sets in. We have to nip it in the bud. Since the enemy refuses to fight, we must seek out their sanctuaries in the South as well as in the North, and avoid scattering our forces, making them more vulnerable. We cannot sit back and wait for nothing to happen or for them to attack us. We have to keep the initiative on our side and conduct raids while maintaining sufficient reaction capabilities to crush them if they reveal themselves. It would be a mistake not to search Mali from north to south. We therefore need to define the successive areas of action and how they are to be carried out. I ask them to write all this up in less than two days, using the tactical reasoning method that we know so well and which enables us to identify options based on our study of the enemy, the terrain, the space-time framework, and the mission.

Search the hunting grounds for them

Claude and Denis are at my side. Everyone is waiting for me to set things in motion based on intuition, experience, common sense, and what we know and can do. We look at the map. We are still "in the clear." Signs of the enemy are scant and we fear half-victory: liberation without destruction. Less than two months ago, I presented the Guepard QRF to the prime minister and the minister of defense. Four weeks ago, we landed in Bamako. Today we are deployed in a country twice the size of France, looking for the enemy and the people they have taken hostage. My intention is clear: prioritize search areas and propose to Paris a series of sorties while holding Gao. Our search of the geographical areas—the Adrar, the area north of Timbuktu, Gourma, and the Menaka region—will have to follow the tactical principles of air-land combat. Until we are sure that all areas have been searched and that the enemy can no longer carry out coordinated attacks with several hundred fighters, we will avoid the use of small, light units, which are particularly vulnerable to large enemy forces. Once the large battalions are destroyed, our smaller units can carry out targeted and remote counterterrorism operations. In the meantime, in keeping with our doctrine, we need to identify enemy hideouts using our small intelligence teams, as well as our brigade and other informants. The idea is to put boots on the ground in numbers around Gao and in the Adrar, without taking excessive risks.

I tell the staff our objectives and the sortie conditions for the coming weeks. For now, we want to avoid leaving fewer than 150 men alone. Each movement must take into consideration our medical evacuation and logistical resources.

Together with the two deputy commanders, we will summarize these principles in a sentence borrowed from the former Soviet doctrine: "no

move without intel and support, no move without communications and reinforcements." We will occasionally end up attacking without real reinforcements and with capricious communications, but these principles will guide our actions in the North and the South. There will be no compromise for the safety of our men. I grew up not long after the battles in Indochina and Algeria—the bloody struggles of our veterans. When faced with enemy forces in great numbers, nothing beats armored vehicles, a Kevlar helmet, and body armor.

Behind every soldier there is a worried family

In Algeria, France deployed 400,000 troops and more than 1,000 helicopters for several years. We lost 10 men every day, 100 times less than during World War I. Nowadays, losses quickly become unbearable. The 10 casualties in Uzbeen in 2008, on Afghan soil, still linger in our memories. It is impossible to ignore the way society has evolved. The leader's role is to fulfill his mission while keeping his men alive. He knows that behind every soldier there is a worried family. For 36 hours, we are going to apply the National War College method, each one of us in our own capacity, with freedom to think outside the box, following controlled procedures that would ultimately help me devise a plan for the most needed and promising operations, prioritizing ten or so geographical areas to be assigned to the CAT. Not knowing where the enemy is, we decide to criss-cross the country, especially suspicious zones, and always be ready to regroup to face the enemy. The brigade designs the overall maneuver, the CATs coordinate, and the captains lead the operations in their zone.

On the evening of the 17th, at 1 am, we send our plan with its justifications and additional requests by secure network to Paris and Bamako. At the same time, CAT 2 continues its search along the Niger north of Gao and has found ammunition dumps and a large number of rockets. CAT 1 in Timbuktu was replaced by a squadron from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt stationed in Angoulême, and Gèze has left for Chad. A page has turned with the departure of the first CAT. On the evening of the 17th, the helicopters unsuccessfully tried to track down a makeshift ferry on the Niger River, used by the terrorists to reach the North.

Monday, February 18

The Gauls in the Niger bend, the others in the North

The OCCC confirms in the morning that our plan has been approved. It fits perfectly with the joint staff's expectations. The aim is to track down the enemy everywhere, through decentralized operations, CAT 4 between

Tessalit and the Adrar, one CAT around Gao, and the other CAT in a priority zone.

Denis, Claude, and I naturally set the Northern Zone between Kidal and Aguelhok as an objective. I decide to keep CAT 2 in Gao and order CAT 3 to depart on the 20th. I know that CAT 2's armored vehicles are particularly well suited to hard fighting in urban areas and that they will be able to track down the katibas in the eastern wadis faster than the APCs. Without artillery, CAT 2 will be able to use its machine guns. My intention is simple: focus our effort on the Northern Zone. Pre-position two thirds of our forces around the Adrar, one third in Gao, without forgetting Timbuktu, so we have large numbers to engage in combat in the Adrar, alongside our Chadian allies, should we find the enemy there. By leaving CAT 2 in the South, I know that I am leaving our most maneuverable unit with the most efficient equipment, led by brave and enduring infantrymen.

The journalists are back from Bourem where they were able to get some good photos and interesting stories to report on. I take time to meet with them and show them part of the complex yet well-organized CP. In Tessalit, Xavier continues his missions in the Adrar. He sent his paratroopers, armored vehicles, and infantrymen from the 126th further south. He is cautious and he already knows that CAT 3 will soon reach the Northern Zone, but neither he nor I know that today will be the last day of calm and uncertainty.

Top: 27 April 2012 in Buzat France: former marathon athlete Alain Mimoun, a veteran from the 3e DIA wears again the badge with the three crescents and the Victory, 68 years after Monte Cassino. Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

Right: Carefully carried along by the executive officer, the small replica of the “3” Victory will keep the symbol and the lucky charm of the Serval Brigade from Clermont-Ferrand to Bamako, Timbuktu, Gao and Tessalit. Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

24 to 27 January: raid of Battle Group 1 (GTIA 1) from Markala to Timbuktu on the route Joffre with scouting from the helicopters of the AirMobile Group (GAM). Photo courtesy of 2e Régiment de Hussard.

25 January, Sévaré airport, first encounter with Colonel Major Dacko, theater commander of the Malian Forces, brother in arms and crucial partner in the country's liberation. Photo by Jérémy L. via ECPAD.

26 February, meeting for assessment and decision in the sands of Niafounké with col Geze / GTIA1-21 RIMa (left), col Gout / GAM-5e RHC and our malian allies. Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

Timbuktu, 28 January 2013. Triomphant welcome from the population. Joy is the streets. In a few hours, French flags are sewed to honor the liberators. Photo by Jérémy L. via ECPAD.

2 February, Timbuktu, Visit of Presidents Hollande and Traoré to the Franco-Malian troops who freed the town. 2nd row: ministries, to the left : General de Saint-Quentin commanding the operation, Admiral Guillaud (CEMA - Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces), General Dembélé (CEMA of Mali), with Képi, General Puga. Photo courtesy of BCH Peducasse.

21 February 2013, street fighting in Gao. Gauls GTIA 2 (92e Inf Reg) are engaged at short distances against suicide fighters. Photo by L. Jérémy via SIRPA Terre Image.

Chadian Generals Bikimo, Chief of the Chadian Response Force (center) and Déby (left), steady and efficient allies of the Brigade in the fights for the Adrar of the Ifoghas, as of the 22 February. Photo by F. Jérémy via SIRPA Terre Image.

25 February, CP of the GTIA3-1er RIMa, at the threshold of the valley, the day before the attack, sharpening preparation and morales forces. Photo courtesy of ECPAD Arnaud R.

26 February 2013, trucks from the Logistics battalion (BatLog) loaded with paratroopers leave Tessalit heading to their attack position in the North of the Ametettaï area, under a scorching sun. Beginning of the operation Panthere 3. Photo courtesy of Ghislain M. via ECPAD.

West threshold of the Ametettaï valley, after a 48 hours journey across desert, the bigors (marine artillery) and their Caesar guns support infantry in contact. Photo by Arnaud R.

Along with the Infantry, in the rocky uplands of Adrar, in high heat, for the last meters, the support fires are in place. Photo courtesy of Ghislain M. via ECPAD.

Tessalit, 1st March 2013. Contingency CP G 08/11e BP of the Serval Brigade conducts warfighting in the North. To the left in the rear, LCL Bruno, chief operations, standing to the right, LCL Rodolphe coordonnator for air support. Photo courtesy of Ghislain M. via ECPAD.

3 March, Tessalit: Honnors to Corporal Cédric Charenton from the 1er RCP (Airborne regiment), killed in action for France during an assault. Combats are still on. Photo courtesy of BCH PEDUCASSE.

Combat in the Adrar, light armor squadrons are in support of infantry, destruction of the Jihadist positions with armor-piercing and shaped-charged shells. Photo by Ghislain M. via ECPAD.

5 March 2013. From the heights of the Ametettaï, a view on the “vegetable garden” of the Jihadists, near a well. Downhill to the right, the TAC CP of GTIA 4-2e REP. Photo courtesy of Jean-Luc Bodet.

Top: Impressive result from the fights in the Ametettaï valley, partly gathered to present to the Minister during his visit. Photo courtesy of Rémi Scarpa.

Middle: Tessalit, 7 March 2013: presentation of the operational picture to the Minister of Defense before taking off to rejoin the troops in the valley. Photo by Arnaud R. via ECPAD.

Left: Adrar : glue on the rangers boots doesn't resist to the heat (104° F) and the toughness of the ground, logistics is under extreme pressure. Photo courtesy of Arnaud R.

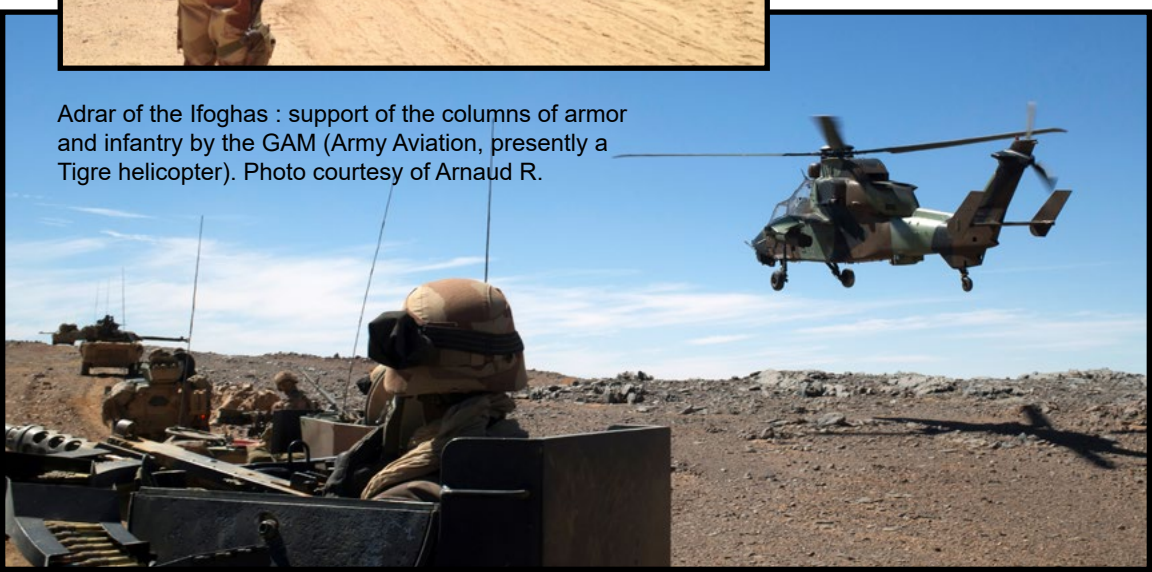
Tessalit, laundry washing between two operations undergoing the amused contemplation from Xavier, deputy commander for the North. Photo courtesy of Rémi Scarpa.

14 March: rehearsal before the attack on the Terz valley. Aside the giant sandbox (to the right: Col Gougeon GTIA3, to the left: Col Desmeulles, de Bertier, Vanden Neste). Photo by Arnaud R.

Tessalit, 14 March. Taking advantatage from the relative freshness of the night, mechanics from the GAM repair their machines.Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

15 March 2013. Foreign Legion paratroopers leave Tessalit for the Terz valley (opération Panthere 6). Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

Departure of the armor vehicles of GTIA 3 towards Terz. One will not come back. Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.



Adrar of the Ifoghas : support of the columns of armor and infantry by the GAM (Army Aviation, presently a Tigre helicopter). Photo courtesy of Arnaud R.

Left: 23 March 2013, flight above the Assemalmal circle, “an oven.” Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

23 March 2013, surveying a scorching, lunar landscape between the Terz Valley and the Assemalmal Circle with the Bisons from the 126th Infantry Regiment. Photo courtesy Rémi Scarpa.

26 March 2013, Operation Tigre in the town of Tessalit, last mission for the légionnaires of Colonel Desmeulles (to the right), GTIA4/2e REP. In the middle, Major Scarpa. Photo by Philippe de Poulpiquet.

Top: Gao, main CP, nerve center of the Brigade Serval, evening brief. Photo by Jean-Luc Baudet.

Above: April: nautical night infiltration with kayaks and divers from the sappers of the 31e RG, Kadji island on the Niger river. Photo courtesy of GSOA.

5 April: raid in the sands of Arouane, 250 kms North of Timbuctu, South of the Sahara. Photo courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

Operation Gustav, discovery by the sappers of buried ammunition depots and airplane. Photo L. Jérémy via ECPAD.

Gauls and VBCI from GTIA2 in the wadis of the extended area of GAO where harsh fighting against MUJWA took place (Doro operations, February-March). Photo by Ghislain M. via ECPAD.

30 April 2013, Operation AKELLO, Colonel Bert, commanding GTIA 2-92e RI presents the situation of his battalion in the overheated valleys. Photo courtesy of P. Johanne via ECPAD's Marine Nationale Collection.

Before the the “défilé du 14 juillet” in 2013, last photo bringing together the 2 deputies et the 2 chiefs of staff. From left to right : Colonels Minjoulat-Rey, Denis, Vanden Neste, de Bertier; The general in the middle. Photo courtesy of Rémi Scarpa.

“Victory parade” for the Brigade Serval behind their brothers in Arms of the African units. Photo by L. Jérémy via ECPAD.

A Single Aim—Victory

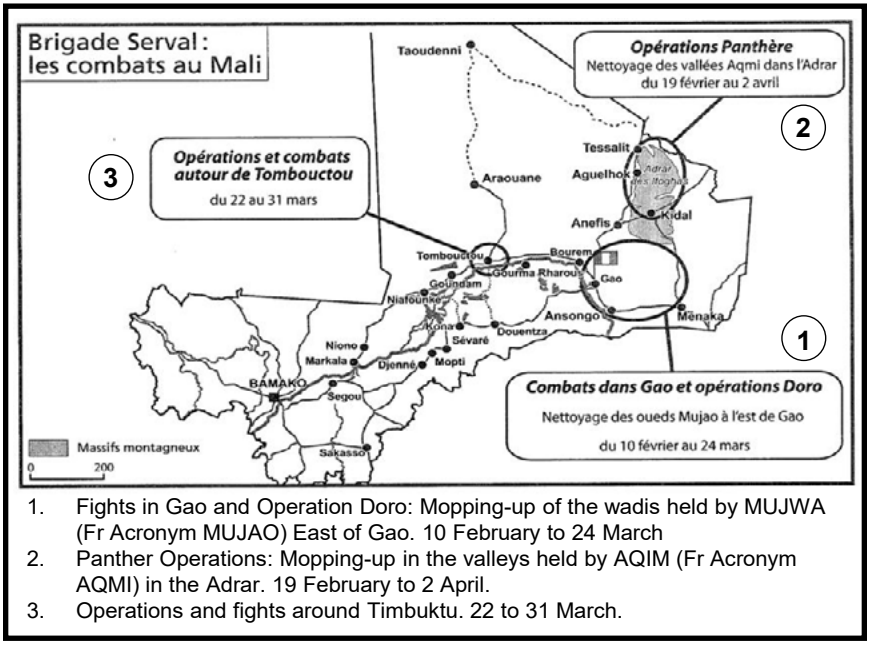
Image courtesy of Bernard Barrera.

Part 4

"Destroy them!"

February 19 – March 31

Time for battle: Adrar des Ifoghas, Greater Gao, and Timbuktu



1. Fights in Gao and Operation Doro: Mopping-up of the wadis held by MUJWA (Fr Acronym MUJAO) East of Gao. 10 February to 24 March
2. Panther Operations: Mopping-up in the valleys held by AQIM (Fr Acronym AQMI) in the Adrar. 19 February to 2 April.
3. Operations and fights around Timbuktu. 22 to 31 March.

Figure 8. Serval Bde—Combats in Mali. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

Tuesday, February 19 and Saturday, February 23

The veil is lifted

The start of the day was calm: Denis left for Timbuktu by helicopter for his daily briefing with our allies. We are refining our efforts at coordination in the event suicide bombers return to Gao. The Malians have decided to ban all crossings of the Niger by boat, to avoid nighttime infiltration by terrorists.

At 9 am, I have barely reached the CP when we learn of a serious skirmish in the Adrar between the CAT 4 column and terrorists holed up at the entrance of the Ametettai Valley. Behind the scenes, minutes of waiting seem to last for hours. Xavier calls to warn me that someone has been seriously wounded and asks me to dispatch the Tigers from Gao. He

wants to clear the ambushed column first. The helicopters take off a few minutes later. With help from the paratroopers, the armored vehicles of the 1st Mar Inf Rgt have located where the shots are coming from in the rocky barriers. Fortunately, the column of small vehicles was attacked too soon and the legionnaires had time to protect themselves behind some black stone boulders. A barrage of fire from Kalashnikovs hails down on them. Staff Sergeant Vormezeele is seriously wounded by a direct hit. The AMX-10RCs' 105 mm cannons and machine guns neutralize anything that moves. A tank advances into the open to protect the withdrawal of unarmored vehicles. The body of the paratrooper is placed on the tank for evacuation. In Gao, we suspect that the Adrar is about to get hot real fast.

The gates to the Adrar are closed
The death of Staff Sergeant Vormezeele

Our men know how to fight and they immediately reacted the right way to protect themselves and avoid being killed, then to strike back at the enemy, combining fire from infantry and armored vehicles. We learn of the death of our NCO. Terrorist casualties are estimated at 20 killed. The tanks fired more than 30 shells in one hour of battle. The unit is now safe from harm. The heat is overwhelming. We need to be wary in all directions. The enemy maneuvers quickly and they could circle back and attack us from the rear. The unit will stay put for several days to block the valley and observe the ridges.

This skirmish confirms to me that the Adrar is not empty and that this valley remains off-limits to our troops. The previous day's plan of operation will be put on hold for a few weeks. From now on, I consider that it is no longer a priority to search suspected zones where the enemy may regroup, but rather to concentrate on the Adrar while maintaining a strong force in the Gao region. With Claude, we look at the map, CAT 3 is getting ready to join the western slope of the Tighaghar, 300 miles further north. The resources available for the G08 CP to command this force are insufficient over the long run. Its staff, information systems, and communications are too limited. The brigade has two options: either set up a forward CP from the main CP in Gao by placing it opposite the Ametettai at Aguelhok, or to reinforce Xavier's G08 CP. The joint staff had already planned for these two options, weighed the pros and cons, and finally chose the second. The Tessalit airstrip is usable, but not the one in Aguelhok. Installing a new CP in the North would require additional protection, thus fewer troops for the upcoming fight. After consulting with my two deputy commanders, we choose the solution that makes sense: reinforce the CP in Tessalit and send CAT 3 as quickly as possible to the North in the Aguelhok region. The at-

tack orders would come later, once we had a little more intel on the enemy, studied the terrain better, and knew the logistical capacity of Bamako to support this far removed tactical effort. This time there will not be 600 of us like last week, nor 1,000 like today, but 2,000 in the North.

The airmobile CP, its 20 soldiers from the 53rd Communications Regiment, inflatable tents, and satellite assets are sent by Transall to Tessalit without delay. This will give Xavier better means of communication and access to files from the main CP, transmitted by satellite: 3D views of the Adrar terrain, aerial photos, as well as intel on the enemy and their positions. Twenty-four hours after having hatched a plan to search for isolated terrorists in wide open spaces, we are back to our maps and our tried and true blueprints for a classic battle. We call this a "Mourmelon" battle, named after the camp in Champagne where the army trains their armored vehicles, artillery, and air support to destroy an enemy that is sitting tight or on the move. We don't know what's in the valley. So we're going to have to go in the "old-fashioned" way, for several days or weeks, and that's exactly what ground forces are meant for. Victory is won on the ground by destroying the enemy. Nonetheless, they have to accept the fight, which they did on the morning of February 19th, cornered in their den.

By evening, everyone understood that the enemy was there and that we were on the verge of an extended period of fighting. The brigade just lost its first soldier under fire. He will not be the last. After the first few casualties, the psychology of the troops is no longer the same. A collective awareness of death sinks in the moment everyone becomes aware that they can "really" be hit, the moment when death has a face, that of a fellow soldier. It is also the time when fear, resentment, and hatred can take hold of a worn-out and poorly commanded unit. Our units will suffer our losses without giving in to the cowardice of disproportionate violence, but tonight we are all thinking about Staff Sergeant Vormezeele's family. We do not know them, but our thoughts and prayers are with them. We also think of our own families. Vormezeele was the son of a Belgian colonel, one of the best of the 2nd Foreign Legion Para Rgt, experienced in combat and respected. His body was evacuated from the valley by helicopter. Xavier gathered his paratroopers behind the CP building in the Tessalit camp to pay him tribute before the plane took off. The evening briefing does not have the same ambiance as the previous days. The faces are serious, the hangar quieter. The officers take turns in front of the map. Claude summarizes and distributes the tasks for the next day before handing me the microphone. The fog of war is beginning to clear. I ask everyone to remain vigilant. The next few days will be crucial. Meanwhile, "*we all*

show solidarity for the Foreign Legion Para Rgt, a minute of silence in the CP." The silence is short-lived as the Casa de Tessalit, a small medical Transall, pulls up next to the hangar with a deafening noise, the time to refuel and take off for Bamako. Everyone in the CP turns to see the airplane's silhouette through the windows. No one moves. I joined the crew. The mechanic opened the rear ramp for me and then ducked out. It's dark, but the inside of the plane is lit. The green coffin is strapped to the center of the cargo hold. I stand for a few moments in front of him, fully aware of the weight of responsibilities, the uniqueness of a soldier's job, kill or be killed in the line of duty, all reasons to be cautious before engaging your men in battle. On behalf of the brigade and those thousands of men who are thinking of him in silence, I salute my NCO before his last journey.

Wednesday, February 20

Tiger helicopters, riddled with bullets, retreat to Tessalit

In Gao, Operation Python is over. The entire area has been searched. Senior Colonel Dacko has returned from Bourem. Colonel Bert gives us an account of the stockpile of ammunition and mines they found. We have loosened restrictions in the city, but we must quickly do the same further east toward Djebok and on the suspect islands of the Niger River. During the night, divers of the 31st Engineer Regiment will infiltrate several miles of shoreline to locate terrorist lookouts on Kadji Island—an island that we will occupy by dawn, to the surprise of its occupants.

Early in the afternoon, the armored unit attempts to approach the old combat zone to see if the enemy is still blocking the entrance to the valley. We don't have to wait long to find out. The position is held firmly. Two Tigers take out the machine gun nests that have been detected. They are supplied from the sandbars by a number of shooters equipped with Kalashnikovs and camouflaged deep in the entrance of the valley. The resistance without any signs of retreat in spite of the shells and bombs is surprising, especially as the two Tigers, hit several times, were forced to rush to Tessalit, 30 miles away. "*This confirms my intuition to fight a joint and combined arms battle with support.*" Even if the idea crosses certain minds in Gao, we are opposed dividing into two zones. It is more necessary than ever to leave the brigade in control of its resources and their use, in order to act quickly when the opportunity presents itself. The artillery, limited to two Caesar howitzers and four heavy mortars, the Tiger and Gazelle HOT attack helicopters are all still positioned in Gao, as are CAT 3 and its reserve of tanks. Placing the burden of the Adrar in the North on the paratroopers alone, without support, is not realistic, no matter how brave

and valiant they may be. With my team, our minds are focused after this second day of fighting in the North, and we come to the same conclusion. We have just changed our posture. We are facing a determined enemy, in numbers and who are occupying terrain they know well. They have had time to prepare in the Ametettai Valley where it is possible to find water all year round. General Dembélé was not mistaken.

I give my CP three instructions: "*beware of diversionary maneuvers, attacks that we don't expect, keep tabs on vital needs (ammunition, fuel), and don't scare the families*." Indeed, I expect more than ever to be attacked in Gao, the best tactic to prevent us from sending reinforcements to the North, the quickest way to force us into a defensive posture and avoid going after the katibas in the surrounding wadis. At the same time, I want to ensure that we have the means to conduct operations over the long term, which means building up our supplies in Tessalit and Gao. Grégoire and his logisticians know that without the convoys of the logistics battalion between Bamako, Gao, and Tessalit and without transport planes for emergencies, it will be difficult to attack AQIM in the Tighaghar. Finally, I do not forget the legitimate concern of the families as they hear the news of our first losses.

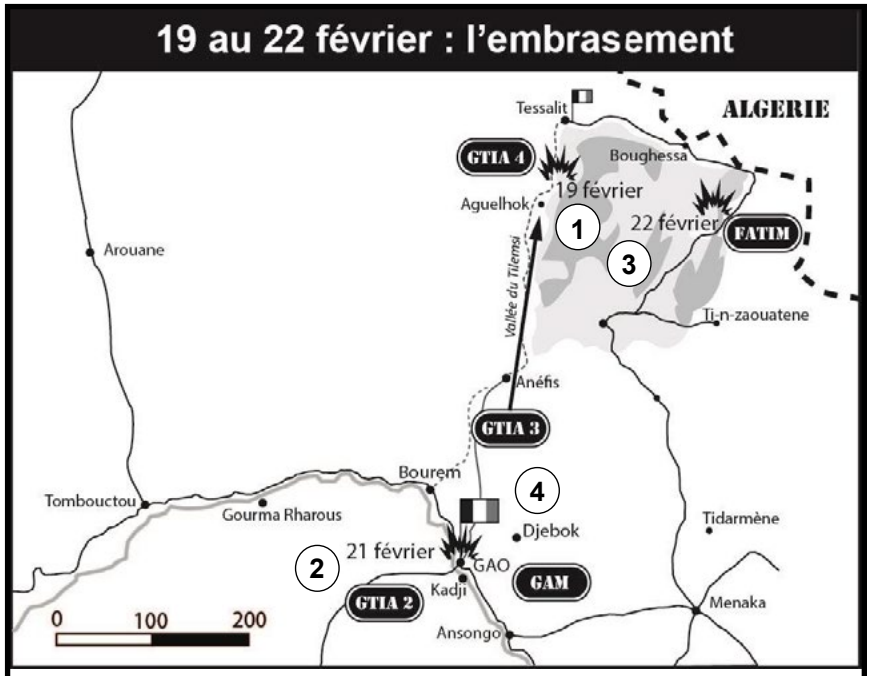
Artillery will always be the infantryman's life insurance

With Claude and Denis, we make another list of the tasks to be done and the needs. Our anticipation the last few days has spared us from being taken by surprise. We have been working together for a month, a month of clockwork precision and daily briefings with Paris first, then Bamako. Everyone has found their place. The three CATs, the HU, the CP, and the small paratrooper CP are settled and know each other well. So as not to leave Gao destitute, I reiterate my request for two additional Caesar howitzers for the South. They are part of the basic capabilities of a deployed ground force. They have the enormous advantage of being able to fire rapidly, accurately, and effectively up to 25 miles away, and non-stop, which is something that helicopters or aircraft alone cannot do as they are not always available. Artillery remains essential for air-land maneuvering. The other two resources complement it at best; the right combination of these three capabilities will save many lives and facilitate victory.

10 pm. It is late. I told the surgeons I'd come to see them at their field hospital. This morning a corporal was shot in the leg by someone mishandling a weapon. It could have cost him his life. His fellow soldiers rescued him by carrying out first aid on the spot before he was evacuated. He's lying down, conscious but under sedative. I squeeze his arm and say

a few encouraging words before leaving. For him, the campaign in Mali is over. Accidents are unfortunately part of the reality of war. They accounted for nearly half of the French losses during the Algerian War. There will be more accidents in the next three months, but luckily we will not lose anyone.

The medical team is efficient and diligent with the wounded. They too have their supply problems. While discussing with them, I understand that they would like air-conditioning for their tents and a washing machine for the sheets. We will get them what they need quickly. The only air-conditioning units during the beginning of this campaign were for the servers of the communication systems and for the wounded.



1. 19 February.
2. 21 February.
3. 22 February.
4. Tilemis Valley.

Figure 9. 19-22 Feb—The Blaze. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

Thursday, February 21

Massive suicide attack in Gao

It seems like it's going to be a normal day. With Denis, Rémi, and my bodyguards, we share some coffee and dry cakes on the small terrace

of the tower, opposite the helicopters. Today is the anniversary of the beginning of the fighting in Verdun in 1916, the sacrifice of Driant's light infantry at the Bois des Caures, total war, the war of sacrifice, of infantry attacks, and artillery fire that kills.

In the tactical operations center, we get the morning briefing on the day's operations. G08 is devising plans to return to the valley. Without artillery or armed helicopters, I am not in favor of this at all, especially since aerial photos show tracks in the Adrar, probably left by a construction machine used by the terrorists to prepare the terrain, dig holes, trenches, and shelters. "*We have not yet taken the massif*" and we will very likely have to approach it with all our capacities and means to defeat our enemy with the least amount of losses. Last night, the Nigeriens returned fire and repelled an infiltration attempt near the northern checkpoint. The threat is becoming clearer.

The day will be long, a day of street fighting in Gao against 20 to 30 terrorists who have infiltrated the city. Informed by the population, the Malian forces of Senior Colonel Dacko will take the first hit, as on February 10th. The reserve unit is immediately put on alert to assist them: a company of 92 infantrymen in AIFVs, which reached downtown and the Malians by heading toward the smoke and the sound of machine gun fire.

As always in an emergency, confusion is rampant and it takes time to see things clearly and to coordinate with allies, in order to avoid friendly fire and collateral losses among the ubiquitous locals. The terrorists have entered the city center, the historic district around the town hall. Holed up in the thick-walled houses, they are safe from the small arms of Dacko's troops. They will have to be dislodged and neutralized with anti-tank missiles and 25 mm chain guns from our AIFVs. We follow the fighting through the reports of Bert, who has set up his tactical CP behind his vanguard unit. This company has been on Guepard QRF standby for more than a year and has thoroughly prepared. They had three weeks of combat exercises in the village of Sissonne. The Gauls are ready to get down to business and apply what they have learned. At the CP, everyone is at their post and we monitor the lockdown of the center while keeping tabs on the outskirts of the city. The helicopters have taken off and are feeding us additional intel. We fear complex, multi-site attacks, staggered in time. We cannot focus all our attention on the visible hot spots, lest we be taken by surprise elsewhere. The infantrymen have got out of their armored vehicles and are immediately engaged in battle in the streets of Gao. Supported by fire from the AIFV turrets, the lieutenants and sergeants command their courageous men forward. We have to react quickly and focus. When an

enemy is firmly entrenched, every mistake is paid for in blood and lives lost. As in Sissonne, the company managed to demarcate the enemy positions and encircle the terrorists by driving them toward the Niger River. The sections maneuver in the neighborhoods, perfectly commanded by Captain Jean Baptiste who follows the encirclement on his map facing the terrain. The locals have fled the center. Snipers have taken up positions on the rooftops to neutralize those who try to infiltrate or intercept our men. An Eryx short-range anti-tank missile and AT4 rockets are fired at a building held by the enemy.

In liaison with the infantrymen on the ground, a Gazelle anti-tank helicopter has detected a hive of terrorists on the ground floor of a large building facing our troops. It is equipped with an extremely accurate HOT missile with a range of 2.5 miles and that was designed to stop Soviet tanks on the plains of Germany and Poland. The building will have few survivors after this missile hits it, but the pilot and his gunner need the green light from the CP to fire this ammunition in town.

No one at the CP has forgotten the controversy provoked by a journalist after the helicopter fired at terrorists holed up in the police station on the 10th. He had too quickly reported civilian casualties after discovering the suicide bomber's remains at the entrance to the building. A second time, my HU liaison officer turns to me for permission to fire. The decision can no longer wait. The enemy has been located, but they can run away and attack our infantrymen approaching from behind. Or they can simply stay put and try to kill as many of ours as possible as we move in. They started laying explosives to booby trap the surroundings and blow themselves up as suicide bombers. We will find the belts and wires ready to be used. The CP has become quiet again. Everyone is aware of the alternative: fire a heavy missile into the city or go in with a bayonet, both options carry risks.

I turn to my operations officer. As far as he is concerned, the civilians have left the building. Bert is in town. He is probably thinking about the incidents we experienced together 13 years earlier in Mitrovica. He was captain and commander of the 2nd Company of the 92nd. I was his chief of operations. We were in the Little Bosnia District in the Serbian Kosovar region north of the Ibar River. About 40 Albanian Kosovars had infiltrated the city and were terrorizing the Serbian neighborhood. His Gauls had managed to surround them and I had joined him to coordinate the action of our two companies in town. Despite the first serious injuries, the infantrymen had sealed off the area. Supported by fire from the 20 mm chain guns on the AMX-10P armored vehicles, we engaged the

sections in the small streets until we reached a large building where the gunmen had dug in. The enemy was only a few yards away. A trembling interpreter told them to surrender over the loudspeaker. It was raining. Warrant Officer Valbrun was at my side, positioning his Gauls in front of the windows where the shots were coming from. Valbrun was calm and irreproachable, an example for young commanders. I will see him again a few years later in the 16th Battalion of Chasseurs, still in charge of a section, and I will choose him straight away to carry the pennant, the battalion's emblem. That NCO was solid. He knew how to fight and get the best out of his infantrymen when bullets were whizzing by. He was a true warrior.

Within minutes, the calm of Mitrovica had given way to violent street fighting that required expertise and professionalism. A well-aimed rifle grenade fired by the warrant officer wounded two shooters 30 yards in front of us. I did not have permission to fire a missile into the roof, so we were about to enter the building when the Kosovars decided to surrender.

This time, Valbrun is not with us. Bert is still in town with his Gauls and it's up to me to take responsibility for firing or sending in the infantry. I'm not with them, but when the question is asked, I remember 13 years earlier being in that fire-battered alley. I remember those three corporals kneeling against a low wall with their weapons, tense but determined not to disappoint their leaders. My mind is made up and I will assume responsibility for it. We must destroy the enemy with fire, and not expose our men unnecessarily. I am familiar with HOT missiles. I have fired two of them and commanded a company with HOT missiles on APCs, 20 years ago. They weigh 66 pounds each and fly at more than 200 yards per second. The missile scrupulously follows the trajectory set by its shooter who places a cross on the target with a very sensitive small handle. Its explosive charge is formidable against a heavy tank or a building. "Permission granted, tell the Gauls to take cover." A few minutes later, the resistance is completely destroyed, with no losses.

The infantrymen resume their advance. The enemy in the big building did not surrender. They had no intention of doing so. A terrorist has just been neutralized while driving his explosive charge into our lines on a motorcycle. At the same time, the Malians and Nigeriens at the northern checkpoint intercept an enemy group that was trying to reach the city center. They will be neutralized in the afternoon by our African counterparts after chasing them down in town. We follow the events, informed by the CAT, the helicopters, and our allies. From the CP, we can see smoke rising over the city.

Adrar and Gao, perfectly coordinated terrorist attacks

This time, I am sure that the terrorist groups in the North and the center—AQIM and MUJWA—are coordinating with each other. We will have to attack them at the same time to avoid taking hits on a non-existent rear base. The brigade will have as many fronts as they do positions. There is no question of leaving Gao too exposed by concentrating forces in Tessalit and the valleys of the Adrar. If they are able to send 30 terrorists into town who are doomed and determined to die, it means that they are determined not to retreat to the North. We are in Africa, but this engagement is different from what France is used to managing on this continent. This enemy is identical to the one in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, or Yemen. They are jihadists and life does not matter to them. Nonetheless, we must remain exemplary in our behavior and in our treatment of prisoners and the wounded, and we will. The terrorists have no scruples, and we know that they will show us and our Malian allies no mercy. My legal advisor does not sleep much. Together, we study the rules of engagement, the directives for each scenario, conceived and drafted in Paris. Paris sets out the procedures that the CATs need to follow for prisoners and child soldiers. Tactical orders are always drafted with an eye to their compliance with the law.

In the evening, the tallies are made. The Franco-Malian forces intercepted around 30 terrorists. A few managed to escape under the cover of darkness, but most were killed in the streets and buildings of Gao. The covered market burned down, so did the town hall, but the population was spared. We have a few minor injuries, nothing serious. The enemy—who had the advantage of surprise—was defeated on the terrain they controlled. The Gauls return to base at night aboard their AIFVs. I see their massive silhouettes lining the hangar. The drivers are 20 years old, their sergeants 25. For the youngest, it was their baptism of fire and they will see more of it in the weeks to come. Paris and Bamako followed the events closely. All have understood that the enemy is between the Adrar and Gao. I reiterate my requests for ad hoc reinforcements to provide them with sufficient forces and support for simultaneous fighting on two fronts: two Caesar howitzers, more deminers, spare parts, and more ammunition to keep from running out. At the CP, we closely follow the progress of the logistics column that left to supply Tessalit. The Harfang drone no longer has contact with them and given the intensity of the fighting and the surprise attacks, we fear the worst. At 1:30 am, we relocate them on the edge of the Adrar, immobilized by four vehicles stuck in the stand, but together, stopped for the night. *"They are in Aguelhok, AQIM's stronghold. I am worried about my logisticians on these northern roads at night. This operation is getting*

tougher every day. I put my gun under my sweatshirt pillow. I block the door with my backpack. I am not at all reassured about the airport's security." Indeed, locals have just warned us that 20 suicide bombers have been dropped off 12 miles from the airport to strike at night. The sections are on full alert, and we have not yet received the engineering equipment and gear to protect the tents from artillery fire and to properly detect and prevent infiltration by foot or vehicle into the wide open area just across the airstrip.

Friday, February 22

The courage of the Chadians

Early in the morning, we are awakened by explosions, probably from rockets. The day will be filled with discussions among chiefs and staffs on the organization of command: in short, who should command who, where, and with what. For the brigade, we need to stick to tactical principles and air-land doctrine: unity of command, prioritization of efforts, and shifting support (helicopters, artillery in particular) depending on the mission.

However, the temptation is strong to separate the two fronts: the Africans in the South, the paratroopers in the North, each one commanded by the two CPs in place—the 3rd in Gao and the 11th in Tessalit. In Paris and Bamako, orders have already been given to that effect, without considering my opinion. As I had ordered, CAT 3 has now moved to the Adrar where two thirds of the brigade is now located. I am in Gao on the Niger bend with only CAT 2, and we all know that the time of reckoning is fast approaching in the North. We learn of the Chadian attack east of the Ametettai against well-entrenched terrorists. We still know little, but the G08 CP in Tessalit warns me that the situation is serious and that the door is shut tight on the other side of the valley. Three days after the ambush against our column, the Chadians encountered strong resistance 25 miles further east. Successive reports reinforce our conviction that we need to call in all available units, leaving a pawn for maneuvers in Gao. The place of a general is not on the secondary front, but with the bulk of the brigade, in Tessalit. All that we need to do, as provided for in the regulations, is to strengthen the northern CP so that it can hold out for the duration and get support from the main CP. Our means are too limited to consider independent sectors.

With Denis and Claude, we believe that only the brigade is capable of deciding how best to use its resources. A centralized approach depending on the hits we take, as was done a few days earlier when the Tigers were sent to the Ametettai on very short notice.

In the North, the news is not good. Courageous and offensive, our Chadians attacked the entrance to the valley. Their pickups and armored vehicles rushed toward the enemy positions with sirens wailing and machine guns strafing anything that moves. This raiding technique consists of surprise attacks, which are different from our modes of action, but just as effective as they are deadly. After violent fighting and repeated assaults led by officers, primarily General Mahamat Déby, son of the Chadian president, they broke through the front lines. The defenders preferred to blow themselves up rather than be taken prisoner, some pretending to surrender only to blow themselves up at the last minute to kill the infantrymen closest to them. In the evening, it is clear that the entrance to the valley is still blocked by the enemy. The enemy lost several dozen men. The special forces support detachment was able to guide aerial bombardments during the day, but our allies are relying on them to evacuate the killed and wounded. Xavier sends his helicopters to the other side of the Adrar, two air force Pumas, to make nightly rotations to transport the wounded and dead bodies to Tessalit. Many have been wounded by small-caliber bullets from the latest Kalashnikov models. Initial reports in the evening indicate that 11 people were killed and 58 wounded. On site, paratroopers, doctors, and nurses do their best to isolate the dead in a makeshift morgue and make room for the wounded and treat them as best they can. Their means are limited. The Chadians show stamina that is admired by the French. No one is complaining, no one is screaming. They know that their brothers in arms are doing their best to save them. They stomach the pain and wait silently, like heroes.

Saturday, February 23

Tactical break

All our medical resources have been put on alert. Paris and Bamako have mobilized our forward surgical teams deployed in the Malian theater, but also the civilian hospitals around Bamako and Niamey. Military operations are frozen, while the evacuations from Tessalit to the South are completed and our field hospitals have room again for our wounded troops. It will take two days. In Gao, in front of the CP, surgeons operate relentlessly on the wounded who arrived during the night. I pay them a short visit, mindful so as not to interfere with their work. The Chadians have been hit hard. They have just lost 26 men, and the hospitals have admitted 70 wounded. It's 8 am at the CP. The night was short again. We have postponed the amphibious raid on Kadji Island. We are closely following the two CATs as they get settled in Tessalit and Aguelhok, just

west of the Tigharghar massif. I ask for a situation update on ammunition and fuel in the North.

Claude called the G08, the forward CP in Tessalit. He asked them to specify their needs for reinforcements to last several weeks. Satellite systems are working well. Files flow between the two CPs, 3D mapping of valleys, aerial photographs, and drones. Xavier has just told me about his night in Tessalit, a night of war, death, and injury. He knows that Paris will ask him to resume the offensive in the valley. Xavier is an old soldier. He was in Afghanistan at the time of Uzbeen. He knows what troops can endure—regardless of how brave they are—without intel, artillery, or helicopters, facing entrenched enemies where it is difficult to tell friend from foe. He only really commands CAT 4 in Tessalit, without support which remains in Gao. We share the same analysis about the risks, the need to regroup in the North and attack together under a single command. Only a capability approach will prevail. He made a list of what I need to take into the Adrar: a reinforcement of officers, including my artillery and air force advisors, howitzers, helicopters, and extra doctors.

In the hangar, my men are unaware of these exchanges among their leaders. They sense that we're going to come under more fire and they know I'll be at the forward CP to command the main force. We have been in Mali for a month, and I have been training with them for 18 months. Between us, there is no room for false pretenses. All of them have been on operations, but this one is different and we are not at all sure if we will win. Claude, my dutiful chief of staff, has anticipated my orders, as usual. His team is running like clockwork. He knows their qualities and shortcomings, and how to compensate for them. He waits for the green light to reform the brigade and to detach part of his team to the North. The heat is already stifling. No one says a thing. I realize that they are all looking at me and I can feel their invisible hands on my shoulders. Through their eyes, I feel the strength of their morale, the cohesion of the team, a sense of collective power, the reason we chose this line of work. I understand that they are behind me and that they trust me. We form a united pack.

On my way out, I meet our African allies. Their intelligence network is working well. They have located weapons caches left in the city by terrorists and identified and arrested MUJWA lookouts. They are also following the fighting in the North.

I stop at the base of the tower, sitting with a bottle of water a few yards from the helicopters. Rémi is silently sitting next to me. My mind is made up. We need to assume our responsibilities as far as the Adrar, and not

remain in Gao and leave the paratroopers alone to face an entrenched and determined enemy. It will be everyone's victory or my failure, but at least we will have tried everything and have nothing to regret. We understand from our exchanges with Paris and Bamako that there is political pressure to attack and resume fighting in the Ametettai Valley, in Xavier's sector. With Grégoire, we agree on how to carry out these wishes. His task in Bamako is immense, and he is under direct pressure from Paris. We've known each other for a long time. I have his permission to take over command of all the ground forces and prepare to attack the Tigharghar massif, leaving Denis with a robust CAT 2 in Gao. I meet my team in the small meeting room, facing the map. The decision is made and confirmed. I will leave them for an indefinite period. I give them my instructions, what I expect of them under Denis' orders, to track down the MUJWA katibas, not to wait defensively but to take the initiative. I don't feel any particular joy. When it's time to go into battle, I will leave my loyal Africans to join the forward CP. I warned Xavier, this operation is definitely not like the others and yet we must stick to the principles, even if they don't comply with disproportionate distances to be covered or the conditions under which the brigade's resources can be leveraged. During the evening update, I announce my departure to the CP. They will be in good hands with Denis, the Southern Deputy Commander. Night has fallen. The pressure has come down. We laugh with my close team, the bodyguards, my two sergeant majors, the three captains, the chief of staff, the HR officer, the imagery officer, the two lieutenants, the legal officer, and the communications officer. Denis jokingly congratulates me. I'm going to meet the legionnaires from the Foreign Legion Para Rgt in Timbuktu and the G08 in Gao. On the left, I see the lights from the camp of my dear infantrymen—my Gauls and Bisons. Will they all be here when I get back? They know how to fight. Denis and Claude will not be alone. I look up at the star-studded sky and think of my family. At this hour, they must be sleeping. I go to my room. Rémi has put my satchel next to the backpack. The little winged Victory of Constantine is rolled up in a headscarf between a field ration and two bottles of water. Tomorrow, she will fly to Tessalit.

Sunday, February 24

Direction Adrar des Ifoghas

The helicopter flight is scheduled by my staff for late afternoon. I asked them to give me time to talk to the company of infantrymen engaged in Gao on the 21st and to give them final instructions before leaving. Last bad night of sleep at the base of the airport tower. Planes and helicopters

follow one another on the runway. It's hard to sleep, the last few days are playing over and over again in my head and everything is accelerating, "*it is the unknown: a machine that rushes in with trained people, some of whom are sure to die, while others will have to carry on."* I hear the little Pilatus liaison plane landing. He made a return trip at night for tires and to make sure the howitzers made it to the North.

At 8 am, I walk to the main bivouac area of the 92nd Inf Rgt at the edge of the airstrip. The Gauls are gathered, silent and attentive. They know that I will be leaving them for the Adrar and that the jihadists still need to be flushed out around Gao, that they will most certainly engage in more combat operations in the city and that they will have to be quicker and faster than our adversaries. I see the same faces and attitudes as I did on the soldiers of the same regiment I commanded in the Bihac Pocket 20 years earlier. They are young and are lined up behind their sergeants, their warrant officers, and their lieutenants. Faces that are worth more than great speeches. I gather them in a circle around me, without formality, and I congratulate them for their action in the streets of Gao, relaying to them the compliments of our president for their faultless performance. They were well commanded, fought well, and were lucky, too. One of them had to shoot a terrorist on the ground, whom his AIFV had wounded while riding his motorcycle. As he approached him in an attempt to help him, he barely had time to see him grab the trigger of his explosive belt hidden under his shirt. He reacted faster, killing him so he wouldn't be killed along with his men. One does not kill with indifference, even to save one's skin. This is also why I wanted to comfort and congratulate this sergeant in front of his company, so that he would not feel guilty about acting with good judgment and avoiding heavy losses in our ranks. He could not have reacted any other way.

I have one hour left, the time to gather the CP, my team, the one I have spent the past year and a half with, the team I landed with in Bamako, the team that liberated Timbuktu and engaged in combat in the Niger bend. I will leave them for an indefinite period. "*I leave a confident Denis in Gao. He is solid and calm. He will take the right measures.*" He is supported by my dutiful chief of staff, the orchestra conductor of the CP. This campaign is definitely full of surprises that require the utmost flexibility. More uneven road lies ahead. After having ordered units in Timbuktu that did not belong to my 3rd Brigade in Clermont-Ferrand, I leave my CP to go and command the two-thirds of the brigade from another CP further north, with another team.

With Denis, we take the time to set out how the two CPs will work together. In accordance with the doctrine, the main CP in Gao will syn-

thesize reports and requests sent to Bamako. They will continue to propose future operations to me and decisions based on incidents that are bound to occur in the four occupied zones (Gao, Tessalit, Timbuktu, and Menaka). For a general, this also means that I need to have good connections so I can be reached quickly and above all that I must not be too far from my forward CP to make the right decisions in case we suffer setbacks and need to reallocate the brigade's resources in light of new threats. At any given time, I need to be able to prioritize needs based on known risks. Once the fight has begun, it is often too late to send ground vehicle reinforcements.

I tell Denis that he retains full subsidiarity in his zone with the resources allocated, mainly CAT 2 and some of the helicopters to search for and neutralize the MUJWA katibas around Gao. It is imperative to track them down and destroy them to complete the mission, but also to avoid becoming sitting ducks waiting for the next attack in town. "The best defense is offense," said Foch. In this case, the quote is more relevant and appropriate than ever. Final recommendations are given on the use of support. It seems essential to me to get more howitzers to support the infantry in case we get hit hard. The two Caesar howitzers will join the heavy mortars positioned in the North. Even if CAT 2's AIFVs are powerful, they will need artillery to complete their mission in the wadis. Finally, I see the doctor again to ensure that the deployment of our forward surgical teams will be completed within 24 hours, allowing me to engage my men with the assurance that they will be treated and that there will be no shortage of blood, morphine, or pharmaceutical supplies. Here too the supply line is stretched. Medical needs are a priority for deliveries.

10 am, time to go. The pilots return to their helicopters. Wherever we go, mobile phones are useless: the jihadists destroyed the cell towers in Tessalit. Like my bodyguard and loyal driver, I call my family for a few minutes of privacy. "*The rear base is holding firm. It's snowing in France."* Our families say nothing and wait for us in silence, always fearing the worst.

On the runway, my Africans accompany me with Denis. They are waiting for the Transall from Niamey that will take them to Tessalit. They will make the trip with a company of parachute legionnaires on alert in Gabon. All our efforts and reinforcements are now focused on the Adrar. And yet, we need to maintain the balance and not leave Gao too helpless, nor Timbuktu undefended. Intelligence and support maneuvering are essential.

Arrival in Tessalit, welcoming the paratroopers and the vigil of arms with the Chadians

The Pumas fly north. On the right, I see the AIFV columns and cots placed next to them, the sand, the shrubs, then the camels. After two hours of flying at very low altitude, I land in the Tessalit camp that I am already familiar with. Xavier comes to greet me with his good old soldier smile. Since February 8th, the situation has changed. The legionnaires cleared the camp and removed all the poles and wires to allow the helicopters to land safely, and to equip the perimeter wall and their own buildings with makeshift stairs in case they need to defend the camp from attack.

The small paratrooper CP is set up in the former command building of the 71st Malian Mixed Regiment. The installation is very rustic and simple, but functional. Cut-out parachute canvases have replaced the missing doors. A discipline of silence is strictly enforced and respected in the building, especially within the Tactical Operations Center (TOC)—the nerve center of the CP—to avoid unnecessary disturbances when things get tense. Everyone works at their own level around a large common table. The day before, these men experienced first-hand the arrival and sorting of the dead and wounded Chadians within their walls. The small building in front of the CP was transformed into a morgue for two days. All of them helped the doctors and nurses to dress wounds and assist our brothers in arms, whose dignity in suffering made an impression on every last soldier. They saw death and the effects of the jihadists' weapons. More than ever, they know that the lives of our men depend on the orders they are given. This team is strong, united, and well commanded. I trust them and congratulate them on the work they have done over the past few days. Accepting a new leader is never natural, but in the face of adversity, there is no room for dissension. Xavier makes sure there is none and my Northern Deputy Commander will be my most loyal ally for the next six weeks at this outpost. With Xavier, I settle in a small, 18-square-foot room that I will share with Laurent and Rémi. It is spartan, but it allows us to exchange information as quickly as possible. The TOC is at the end of the corridor, close enough to "*regularly take the temperature*," or step in if necessary while avoiding the common mistake of trying to replace the subordinates and in doing so losing sight of the bigger picture.

The room is as big as the office and the three of us share it with a box of water bottles as a bedside table.

Having quickly swallowed our rations, we spend the afternoon with the CP officers and the three colonels of CAT 3 (armored), CAT 4 (para-

troopers), and the HU (helicopters), cross-referencing our information on the Ametettai Valley, the enemy positions, the possible modes of action, the terrain, our logistical situation, and the readiness of our units. Prepared by the G08, the draft order Panther 3 involves a simultaneous attack on both sides of the valley, like two pistons: to the west, CAT 3 through the Tibegattine pass, where Commander Vormezeele was killed five days earlier, and 25 miles further east where the Chadian contingent is located. In order to surprise the enemy and to split their forces in two, a motorized infiltration is planned, followed by an infiltration on foot by CAT 4 to the hamlet called Ametettai, which consists of a few houses in the middle of the valley. With no other units available, the southern flank of the valley is left open for interception or air strikes (airplanes and fighters). This plan is original and relies on surprise, bypassing the enemy lines in difficult terrain, the same principle at another level as the battle of Dobropolié in September 1918 on the Eastern Front or that of Garigliano in May 1944 south of Rome: attacking where the enemy does not expect us to, a specialty of the Eastern Army and the French Expeditionary Corps in Italy.

To get a better idea of the situation, I decide to go visit the Chadian positions at night in order to meet the chiefs, to assure them of our support after the fighting on the 22nd, and to determine their ability and willingness to resume fighting with us. I am welcomed by the liaison unit (LU) that followed our allies from N'Djamena, a small team of about 20 soldiers, a doctor, a mechanic, and a communicator. It is one of those clear warm nights that Africa is known for. Now is not the time for poetry. The men are grouped in silence around their vehicles, high off the ground and bristling with machine guns. Small lights illuminate the wheels and faces, the lean and nervous figures of resting warriors. Most of them are Zagawas, from eastern Chad, tough, proud, and courageous men.

The welcome is sober and cordial. The four generals and three colonels know that I have come to ask them to get back into the fight. They lost a 100 men—killed or wounded. Considering their numbers and taking into account National War College figures, this is considered massive casualties. To this day, "*they are the only allies fighting with us and they are fighting well. They're driven.*" After two hours of discussions, I understand that they will be at our side. We share some hot sweet tea under the starry sky. The carpets are placed on the sand. A bench and boxes of ammunition are used as seats. Generals Bikimo and Déby tell me about the brutality of the fighting, the repeated assaults of their troops on enemy positions, the jihadists' traps, letting themselves be overtaken before shooting the frontline soldiers in the back, or blowing themselves up after having pretended

to surrender. The prisoners are few in number and with them a few Malian children, probably carrying ammunition and water. Most of the defenders preferred to blow themselves up on boxes of shells rather than surrender. The eastern entrance to the Ametettai has been breached, but there is still much to be done. These first fights foreshadow the defensive resistance to come on both sides. Mahamat Déby warns me. His troops recovered a fully functioning enemy radio which will provide us with valuable information on both sides during the fighting over the next few days, in addition to our own resources. The enemy will call us dogs and the Chadians flies.

Too early to attack

In light of what I have seen since my arrival from one end of this valley to the other, I am firmly convinced that the conditions for success are still not met, even if CAT 4 is ready to reach its assault base in the northern part of the Adrar tonight. Letting them go would run the risk of having them engage the enemy alone without being certain that we could engage the enemy simultaneously at both ends of the valley. It is too early to attack. It is essential that the jihadists are caught in between both pistons, before they realize that infantrymen are about to slit their center in two.

Moreover, having just arrived, I consider the preparation and coordination of the simultaneous attack insufficient. The order for an attack of such magnitude requires an incubation time in the CAT CPs, which cannot be compressed so quickly. Rushing in is dangerous. The lives of these men, whose families are waiting for them and whom France supports, are at stake. The courage of men is not enough. There are rules of engagement that the military knows, and they must be followed to avoid casualties. In this type of combat, it is vital to give leaders the means to see the enemy and destroy them while exposing themselves as little as possible. For the brigade, which does not always have priority for drones, it is a question of placing "eyes" as close as possible and that can be relied on in all circumstances: its helicopters, its ground radars, and its listening devices. Before the attack, it is vital to position, just behind the infantrymen, the artillery to be used, in close liaison and in perfect coordination with the air force, to pound the resistance when they are detected, especially since they will be numerous and well camouflaged. Moreover, the discussions with the Chadians made me realize that I cannot base the operation's plan on troops—no matter how brave they may be—I do not command. How can we be sure that the piston to the east will advance at the right pace?

In the helicopter taking me back to Tessalit, I make the decision to postpone the attack and to review the Panther 3 plan. Principles and fun-

damentals need to be respected. I make a list of the tasks that need to be accomplished urgently: rework the orders, get my air officer up here as soon as possible, set up the sensors, wait for the arrival of the howitzers and mortars at the western entrance, and above all, check in with all the units to make sure everyone has understood their mission correctly.

This Tigharghar massif is both impressive and gloomy. From above, no lights are visible in the Ametettai Valley and yet, I imagine it teeming with enemy combatants. In the dark, you can distinguish somber and sinister reliefs, lighter paths, narrow passes, ridges, so many positions that favor a defensive fight, so many traps where our soldiers will be expected. Where are they? How many are there? What are their abilities, their morale?

When I return, late at night, the orders to postpone are given. The departure of CAT 4 is delayed. The order is reworked to take into account the uncertainties associated with the Chadian advance. Our allies are supplied by our logistics office, which calls in the night to find tires in Kidal and bring them to the other side of the massif. I warn Paris and Bamako, and we go to bed.

Monday, February 25

Pre-attack inspection

The next day is spent refining orders and making sure everything is in place for D-Day. The Tessalit G08 forward command post (FCP) is now reinforced with officers from the 3rd, who arrived the day before from Gao: it is now ready to go the distance. The atmosphere is excellent and the Africans are quickly integrated into the TOC. My artillery liason officer and air officer reached Tessalit with the first Transall in the morning. I immediately bring them together with the HU commander to find the best possible coordination between these three capabilities and to specify it in the orders. Indeed, it is dangerous, and therefore forbidden, to fire howitzers and mortars with fighter jets and helicopters in the same area. Even if the chance of an aircraft being hit by a shell is very small, we need to determine priority slots for each aircraft according to their availability in the area. I believe it is essential to clarify procedures to ensure that front-line units do not experience any disruption of support. Above all, I do not want to see a company "left hanging" in these rocks, without the possibility of bombing the enemy, whether by plane or by howitzer. The combination of fire is an essential element of air-land combat. It allows you to gain tactical superiority, in other words, not to be helpless in the face of an enemy that is revealing itself, and to supplement the fire of your own weapons (rifles,

tanks, or missiles) with ammunition that will strike farther away (15 to 25 miles, but you still have to see the targets) or at such an angle that it can rain down destruction from above (mortar shells, airplane bombs, or helicopter missiles).

"Everyone is there, everyone who will be taking their men into combat…"

The logistical aspects are scrutinized. Our supply of helicopter fuel is at an all-time low. Engaged in the Timetrine, the special forces came to refuel during the night, drying up our meager reserves. We have the bare minimum required for medical evacuations. The afternoon is spent reviewing orders, studying non-compliant scenarios, a procedure which consists of imagining all the possible outcomes and finding the appropriate answers before being confronted with them in an emergency. At the end, I take off in a Puma to join CAT 3, positioned west of the Ametettai. I fly over the armored vehicles in the middle of a black-stone desert, recognizing the logistic zone by the trucks carrying ammunition, water, and fuel, medical vehicles and their red cross, and, at the foot of a small hill, the CP, a few armored vehicles and a shade netting stretched between them. Colonel Gougeon welcomes me. The CP is assembled, about 30 officers, but also the field leaders, whom I wanted to see before the attack. Their faces are weary, the heat is overwhelming. Everyone knows that the Chadians were hit hard four days earlier, that the day before the Gauls and the Malians fought a hard street battle to drive the terrorists out of Gao.

These men will replicate what they have repeated many times over during exercises, on their base, and at the maneuver camps and firing ranges in Champagne and Provence. Faced with a very real enemy, 3,000 miles from France, the choices men make do not have the same impact. Warrant Officer Stéphane of the Mar Tnk Inf Rgt, in charge of supporting the infantry's advance, will have to designate the tanks that will go in front. He knows his men, their stories, their families, but he also knows that the other Porpoises on the ground are counting on him to be protected, or rather supported by his tanks, as we say in the military. This non-commissioned officer of Italian and Gabonese origin, with fine features, has an honest face. He exudes intelligence and willpower. He will play a decisive role in the coming days, leading his men and successively destroying the nests of machine guns in extreme conditions (up to 140 °F in the tank turrets during the firing sequences). The Porpoises from the 2nd are here. They will be supported by the "Roosters"—a squadron from the Mar Tnk Inf Rgt—and all of them will take orders from the CP of the 1st Mar Inf Rgt. The colonials from the 3rd and 9th find themselves in the depths of the former

French Sudan, in this rebellious massif, and are legitimately proud of their history.

The leaders present understood the orders. I give them the bigger picture. The idea is to take this valley and destroy the defenders, wreak havoc like we did during combat exercises, by maneuver and fire. I am counting on them to break the barrier and link up with the paratroopers of CAT 4, 12 miles to the east. Finally, I make it clear that we must avoid overlapping, but we must not waste time. The main objective is to win, not to participate! Given the heat, our soldiers will not be able to last more than eight to ten days. Getting bogged down is not an option. A war of positions would be perceived as a victory by the enemy and could quickly lead to a strengthening of their positions, to a media and political defeat, which we cannot accept. France is behind us. She trusts us, and even if we are stretched thin, the whole army supports us. We have absolute priority, despite the fatigue of our transport aircraft, our armored vehicles, and the scarcity of accessible parts. The history of our veterans unites us and a few references to the glorious past of their regiments in France will motivate these men when they enter the deserted and scorched ridges: Sontay, Puebla... Names of battles from the 19th century.

Everyone senses that the game is not yet won. We don't know what's waiting for us on the other side. It is time to speak the truth, among soldiers ready to go into battle. Jaws are clenched, sentences are short, eye contact is direct. Tomorrow, we will have dead and wounded, but we will have to pursue, fire, and push our men. That is the role of officers and NCOs. These leaders have good soldiers who are motivated and trained. They will have to be commanded in the hardest and most demanding part of the military profession. They will have capabilities (planes, artillery, and tanks). They must not give up, they must not suffer defeat. They will need willpower, willpower that makes the difference, willpower that bends the opponent, willpower that moves men to action in spite of death and the cries of the wounded. It is more than 105 °F under the net. My old NCOs from 1st Mar Inf Rgt are here, helmet in hand. We are far from Angoulême, but, like at home, we share the same values, the same faith. They know the young soldiers will be up to the task.

Fifty faces are looking at me. "*Does the general really believe in this victory?*" Moments of doubt and internalized fears, hidden in the greatest dignity, moments of confidence and union that belong only to those who can look death in the face and accept it. "*Yes, we will beat them because we can and we are determined to.*" It is time to go. I walk around the CP, shaking hands with everyone. Never more than in the depths of this

burning desert, on the eve of an offensive against an ill-determined enemy, have we felt the power of morale, the need for cohesion and *esprit de corps*, and trust between men and their leaders. I left the colonials to join our legionnaires and paratroopers from CAT 4 in their CP at the Tessalit camp. The scene is different. We find ourselves in a small concrete building, but the speech is the same. These men will leave the camp at night, loaded on trucks, logistic APCs, on everything that rolls, in order to bypass the enemy defenses, to finally attack them on foot, the old-fashioned way. They too have seen it all, in Afghanistan and in Africa. The leader of the commando parachute group is there, fine and distinguished, he knows that he will be my only reserve in the North. His men were hit hard five days earlier. I know his father. We were infantry lieutenants together. The colonel's officers, artillery advisors, and engineers are present. Their role will be decisive to facilitate the task of their four colleagues engaged at the head of their parachute legionnaires from the Foreign Legion Para Rgt and the Raptors from the 1st PCR. This is the first time I have seen the leaders of CAT 4. Some parachuted onto Timbuktu, others are coming from Abidjan and Libreville. All are now under the command of Colonel Desmeulles, a leader who exudes serenity, simplicity in human relations, and the highest standards in the military.

When I leave the CP, I go to see my Africans from the armored squadron. This marching unit joined Tessalit on February 8th. It's a mix of Porpoises from the 1st, Bisons from the 126th, and combat engineers from the 31st. I attached them to CAT 4 to give the paratroopers the reach they lack, cannon fire that can destroy something more than a mile away. They have not heard from their families for more than two weeks and will be leaving for the Adrar tomorrow. Victory will depend on them. On land, their sleek and hollow shells are the only ones capable of piercing stone walls, explosives, and machine gun nests.

The sun is setting. Accompanied by my faithful military aide (MA), I return to my building. The logistical aspects, the fuel and ammunition situation, and the evacuation of the wounded still need to be checked. Everything is ready, tense but ready. HU pilots and field surgeons enjoy the relatively cool air to the left of the CP. I am happy to see them again. Everything has been said, tomorrow will be another day.

Vigil of arms. The fear of death, but always hope in the hearts of men

The game is about to start. I feel like I'm the coach going from the locker room to the stands, watching his team play. It's up to them to beat the other team, it's up to me to make sure they have everything they need.

My place will be in this little building behind the maps, screens, and speakers, near the satellite phones. I must be able to be reached by Paris and Bamako and I will be. I need to be able to decide on shifting forces between Timbuktu, Gao, and the Adrar, even if the reserves are limited. I share my office with Xavier and I'm on the phone with Denis, my two deputy commanders. Obviously, I will often be tempted to join the front lines, but we need to limit these sorties for two reasons: a visit of authority monopolizes subordinates' focus, which must be avoided in the middle of an offensive phase, and also because Murphy's Law does not only apply to others. This American law means bad luck or, what we call in French the law of maximum pain. I do not want to run the risk of being away from the CP for too long, of not "sensing" a change in the situation or not making a timely decision that engages the brigade.

Artillery and fire will destroy the enemy and save the lives of infantrymen. I opt to delegate and trust that my two CPs and five colonels heading the CATs and HU will make the right decisions. We are in the same boat and there is no room for internal quarrels and petty rivalries. Tomorrow, they'll be calling the shots. They will be able to fire artillery, call in helicopters, and drop bombs without authorization from the brigade CP, to go faster, something which has not been done for years. The absence of civilians—and therefore the risk of collateral damage—and the need to destroy a mobile enemy led me to make this decision.

A starry sky has replaced the azure-blue sky. I walk along the buildings of the legionnaires, lying on their boxes, their bags packed, and their weapons ready. Some of them are heating up a canteen cup of coffee, most of them are sleeping.

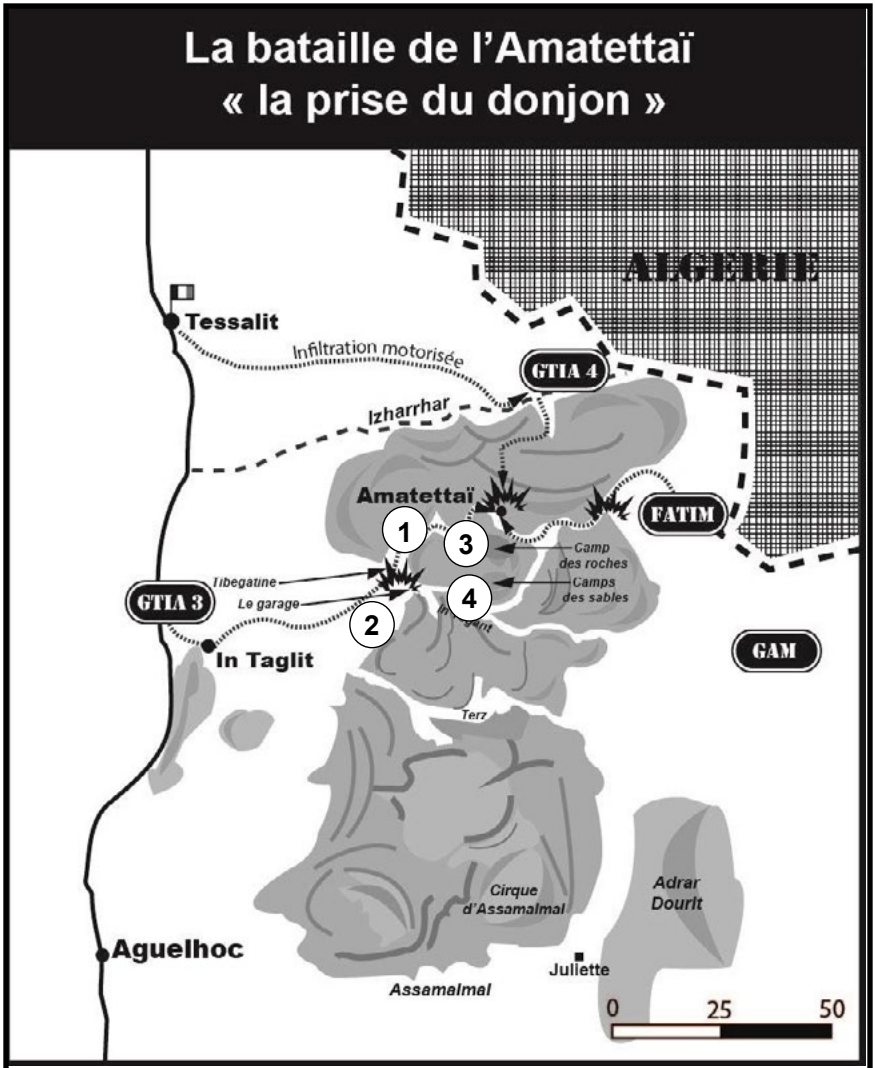
It is time to take stock before the mission, of the situation and the needs. The die is cast. I think about what the enemy might do, what we lack in order to react quickly. I have identified two requirements: not to deprive Gao of armed helicopters (they need to be able to strike deep in the Niger bend to prevent attempts to cross the river and attacks on our two bases) and to free up a reserve of infantry from CAT 2, which is stuck guarding the airport, and if necessary to reinforce the Adrar. Rethinking my overall plan and sticking to this capability approach, I send Bamako and Paris two requests: artillery and engineering reinforcements for Gao and an additional infantry company for Gao or the Adrar. Three weeks later, the Nigeriens relieved my company from the 126th Inf Rgt in Menaka, releasing a 100 infantrymen, which were quickly sent to Gao, then to the Adrar (Valley of Terz, then Kidal). The two Caesars from the 68th Afr Arty Rgt and the combat engineers from the 31st Eng Rgt, are

not available in the theater and will take longer to get. They will finally arrive in early March, in time to be engaged without delay in Operation Doro 2, 125 miles from Gao, just in time to destroy jihadist positions that were about to inflict serious losses on the Gauls and to clear mines "under the wheels" of the AIFVs.

At my level as brigade commander, I went around to think about the present and prepare for the future. It is time to go to bed, but this sky is overwhelming. It covers the sentries of Timbuktu, Menaka, and Gao. I admire it while thinking about all those men surrounding the Adrar and our adversaries defending it.

That night, on both sides of the front, many prayed to God to bring them victory or simply to spare them.

That night, in front of the small CP in Tessalit, I think about an exceptional man whom I had had the good fortune to know, Alban Santini-Allaman, a leader of exemplary humanity and simplicity. He volunteered in his father's regiment in 1915, and ended the war as a lieutenant on the Eastern Front, after having served in Verdun as a sergeant, then Saint-Cyr in 1919, a career in the infantry and the armored corps, before joining the resistance. In the 1980s, I met him regularly to discuss war, death, command, men, our common values as officers, and the infantry. In time, this man became my third grandfather. Facing the Adrar sky, in the darkness, his stories from WWI about brotherhood, fear, death, and a soldier's hope suddenly caught up with me. "Before coming out of the trench, I walked among my men to look them in the eyes, to encourage them. We were all afraid, but each of us secretly hoped to survive alive, even wounded, but alive; and yet we were sure to die before the end of this interminable war. When we learned of the victory on the banks of the Danube on November 12, 1918, we did not understand. We looked at each other, dumbfounded, unable to realize that this was the end of the horror. We weren't overjoyed. After Romania, it was Crimea and a return to the spring of 1919. This generation had been through hell. This man taught me the power of hope in the worst of times, just before the attack and the loss of life.



1. Motorized infiltration.
2. The Garage.
3. Camp of the Rocks.
4. Camp of the Sands.

Figure 10. The Amatettai Battle: Seizing the Dunjon—the Last Stronghold. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

Tuesday, February 26

D-Day. The ride of the artillerymen, the first wounded

CAT 4 has left the camp. Preceded by the armored vehicles, the trucks from Tessalit, similar to the taxis of the Marne, rushed into the

night with paratroopers strapped to the bare platforms of the logistics trucks to avoid falling off. The drivers of the caravan follow the lead tanks there for support, faithful to their motto: "Serve Serval." By 4 am the column is far, and I am waiting for the report that my howitzers have arrived at the western entrance, as artillery is indispensable to supporting and protecting the infantry.

Xavier and I follow the paratroopers' progress on the bad roads of the Adrar over the radio and guess that the artillerymen are between Aguelhok and CAT 3. They've been driving for 48 hours non-stop. Captain Benoit, a strong and charismatic leader, told me that he would be in position at daybreak on the 26th. His battery of marine artillerymen, the Bigors, was moving northward where the two CATs and the Chadians were waiting. He will keep his word and play a role in this collective victory.

By mid-morning, the paratroopers have reached their departure zone 5 miles north of the valley; at the western entrance, the Porpoises are within very close range of the enemy. Warrant Officer Stéphane fires his first tank shells at camouflaged pickups. Covered in dust and exhausted, the Bigors fire 155 mm shells at the enemy positions they detected. The Chadians attack in the east. The jihadists are still unaware of CAT 4's maneuver. Fighters fly over the Adrar, ready to fire their GBU-12 laser-guided bombs. Reports are sent to Bamako and Paris. Grégoire and Patrick call me during the day for situation updates. There is a lot of pressure from the command staff, too, and we understand that. The fighting continues, and the reports keep coming in. The Chadians have been stopped by mines. Some of their men have been wounded.

It's over 105° F. Fire is raining down from the sky as the first wounded are evacuated and arrive by helicopter. One of them was bitten by a viper; another, a solid Wallisian from the 2nd Mar Inf Rgt, had his ear cut by a bullet. The nurse hands me the helmet of the wounded Porpoise. The entry hole of the Kalashnikov bullet is barely visible, just below the forehead, a tiny hole. The bullet was deflected by his helmet, before going around the inside of it and plowing into his scalp. It is still embedded in the Kevlar. Our civil and military engineers, our technicians have saved another life. The advanced field hospital works in silence, like the TOC. This is just the beginning. In the evening, the death toll is 15 jihadists killed and 3 of ours wounded. "*We must advance slowly, take advantage of support, indirect fire to weaken the enemy and not take too many risks. We're doing fine.*" Standing in front of the CP, I see the medical Puma take off, evacuating the first serious injury of the campaign. Unique to France and the result of operational experience, our medical support protects our soldiers in the

vanguard units as best we can: all our soldiers are trained in combat first aid. Each company has nurses and a doctor nearby; helicopters are never far away for evacuations.

This first evacuation reminds me of another wounded man, a young infantry lieutenant, just out of Saint-Cyr and seriously wounded during an assault in June 1957 when buckshot tore off part of his jaw. Thanks to the quick reactions of his nurse and his communicator, the God-send passage of a medical helicopter at just the right time, and the care from an outstanding surgeon at the hospital in Algiers two hours later, he would spend 15 months recovering in a Parisian hospital before returning to the war for four more years fighting alongside the paratroopers. Without this series of fortunate events, he would have been one of the hundreds of young officers killed in action and another general would be in my place facing the Adrar.

Wednesday, February 27

"The confrontation of two wills"

The next day, we are up early with Xavier. The morning will be busy. We no longer have reinforcements in the North. All units are engaged. I call Denis again to tell him of my wish to recover the company from Menaka as soon as possible, well aware that it will take him at least five days to reach us due to repeated breakdowns. CAT 3 has only one infantry company, certainly seasoned and solid, but it is not much, given the vastness of the valley. Three events mark this half-day: a grenade accident wounded three Porpoises in Timbuktu in their armored vehicle. The driver, himself wounded, brought the others back to the camp. They will be saved and evacuated *in extremis*. At the same time, CAT 3 came across a mined area. The lead LAV blew up. They were able to remove the driver from the vehicle. The captain commanding the squadron was stunned, but he continued his mission. The location—a gorge less than 100 yards across—is ideal for mines. Also before 8 am, one of the brigade's mini-drones—piloted by African artillerymen from the 68th—detected tarp-covered vehicles, which will help them direct artillery fire. Lastly, CAT 4 made contact with the northern cover element. The armored vehicles destroyed battle stations with cannon fire before they could fire on the paratroopers on foot. As in the exercise, aerial fire and artillery fire will follow one another while the combat engineers from the 6th remove the mines in scorching hot 110° F weather, wearing helmets and protective gear. I send the colonels an overall update to fill them in on the situation "at the front." On both sides, the jihadist leaders

are calling for reinforcements to repel the "dogs" and hunt the "flies." Airplanes and helicopters are given the task of detecting movements in the valley. Pickups are destroyed. More wounded arrive, including the armored vehicle driver with burns on his legs. He is in good hands and, given his size, he will recover.

"War is a clash of wills," said Clausewitz. I don't know where our enemy is, they don't want to give up. My men are overwhelmed by the heat and the weight of their equipment, and immobilized in the west by mines. The enemy is being bombarded, but they have been holed up in this forbidden valley for ten years. Their shelters are hidden, dug in, and covered by tarps and sand. With the exception of a few highly mobile teams, the enemy is invisible; they are waiting for us in their dugouts. We're coming up on the hard part. The clatter of shells, aircraft bombs, and Tiger rockets are sowing the seeds of doubt. The risk of being caught off guard increases their sense of vulnerability. Never would they have imagined that a Western army would engage their forces in this maze of rocks, in such a strong defensive position a prisoner would later tell us, found half deaf and haggard because of the incessant bombardments. This opportunity arrives in the middle of the afternoon. Within a few minutes of each other, two intelligence reports from different sources, both indicate that the enemy is regrouping in front of CAT 3, at a crossroads called *The Garage*. My intel officer, the air officer, and the artillery liaison officer are immediately ordered to strike them. Their leader gives his orders in Arabic on the radio. He claims to be Abou Zeid. After taking time to coordinate, a Mirage 2000 drops three *Airburst* bombs on the Garage, then the Caesar follows up with 12 artillery shells. The radio is silent. It is impossible to verify the losses, but the blow undoubtedly had a decisive effect on morale. A few intercepts, reporting a "very hard hit," quickly confirm this. "*We feel that the enemy is stalling, wavering. There's no turning back now."* Our Chadian allies hear the enemy in front of them and one of their generals, in the middle of a column of vehicles, has just run over a mine, which slows down their progression. The Pumas take off with their cargo of spare parts and recover their wounded who are immediately treated at the AFH. My fellow Chadian general is shell shocked. Chatter on the radio tells us the enemy is retreating south. Their will is breaking, but beware of traps. Armed helicopters take off in search of vehicles and fugitives. We have no information to that effect, but we are constantly on the alert for hostages. We monitor the attitude of silhouettes and weapons, looking for clues. Two new vehicles, destroyed by a Tiger, caught the attention of the pilots and their colonel.

The day ends. The standoff continues. The Puma took advantage of the night to supply the units with ammunition and water, thousands of liters in boxes, dropped off under conditions of extreme dust and darkness. It is so hot that each man drinks 8 to 10 liters a day, practically without having broken a sweat or urinated. Every day, the base receives 20 tons of water, mainly by trucks and planes. We only have two days worth of supply. Rations do not pose the same problem. The daily ration, consisting of two entrees and powdered drinks, weighs only two pounds.

In the evening, I check in with Denis via satellite. Things are quiet in Menaka and Timbuktu. In Gao, our intelligence teams and Malian allies have located part of the MUJWA katibas in the Djebok region 60 miles further east. Tomorrow, CAT 2 will conduct an armored raid lasting several days to try to flush them out. "Do not wait to be attacked!" said Marshal de Lattre.

With Xavier, we review everything, remembering our tactical principles, our fundamentals: "*No move without intel, no move without support, without liaison, without logistics.*" Tomorrow, the paratroopers will approach the valley, and we will have to keep up the pressure, if not turn it up a notch.

Thursday, February 28

Day 3. Do not let up

The coach is knocked out, hit by a nasty bout of stomach flu. There is no time for a time-out, nor for an infusion at the AFH. Marie-Jo finds me some rice and a can of Coke. The paratroopers have left with all the rehydrating solutions and the pharmacy is partly empty. At 4 am, the last available troops leave Tessalit for a special mission, called "Septenkéro." The mission is to make contact with Algerians at the border and take possession of 18,500 gallons of fuel. We have no more reserves. Everything has been put to use. Secretaries, communicators, and nurses are aware of this and ready to fight if the base is attacked. This delivery will be repeated several times in the following weeks and is the result of an agreement between our two countries, both affected by the same terrorism.

To the east, the Chadians are stalled by mines. To the west, the vise is tightening. In the center, the paratroopers are advancing cautiously, but surely. We must not give the enemy time to rebalance their forces. Early afternoon, the heat is hellish and there is no wind, it's unbearable. The Chadians resumed their advance, but immediately roll over a patch of mines: eight wounded need to be evacuated. CAT 4 clings hard to the gravel bars

as it approaches Ametettai. The Tiger takes off and heads south, shells and rockets locked and loaded. The jihadists are holding their positions but have revealed themselves at the same time, 10 and 300 yards out, on two lines of defense. The companies and sections advanced between the rocks. Desmeulles and his captains are maneuvering, using their support as best they can to take out the enemy and advance their legionnaires and Raptors. Wearing bulletproof vests and helmets, they climb rocks and search caves. They use grenades to neutralize the machine gun nests. "We are the men from the assault troops, soldiers of the old Legion," so begins the song of the Foreign Legion Para Rgt. If they can't do it, no one can. You have to see this regiment maneuver to understand why they deserve their reputation: professionalism, rigor, simplicity, and humility. A fine war machine, the Foreign Legion Para Rgt is the imperial guard of our army. The assaults were violent, a legionnaire was saved by his helmet, another one.

The "fuel" convoy returns from the border, tanks full. The FCP reviews logistical needs and resupply requests. Several hundred shells were fired by artillery and helicopters. I purposely cut the heavy mortar section in half to fire from the west and north. Captain Geoffroy from the 35th Para Art Rgt stationed in Tarbes is in charge, calling the shots from the CAT 4 CP. It's a stretch, but it works. At this rate, I'm afraid I'm going to run out of supply, but there's no way I'm going to give up support. I call Bamako and Paris to speed up deliveries. CAT 4 requests and gets fire power priority for the next day. They have taken out the defenses and intend to enter the valley on foot. The men keep an eye on the ridges. The artillerymen will be at it again tomorrow. We'll need to blind enemy lookouts with smoke and fire quickly from afar to destroy reinforcement columns or their retreat.

Wounded French and Chadians lay on the beds of the AFH, next to our CP. With Xavier, we look at our maps. They are imprecise, but the arrows are advancing, without any casualties so far. Everybody knows, but nobody says anything. Helicopters continue dropping off water and ammunition. The Raptors from the 1st PCR are far from potential landing areas. The paratroopers spend part of the night going back and forth to get water. Tomorrow will be a decisive day. I sign the chief of staff's orders, as precise as ever, after reading them over and over again. "*Damn stomach flu…*"

In the South, Denis launched Operation Doro. The infantrymen from CAT 2 are on the ground. They have only their lighter 81 mm mortars and Gazelle helicopters with anti-tank missiles, but without the firepower of

the Tiger. For anti-personnel support, a Puma has been fitted with a 20 mm door gun. It is old but effective, and the AIFV are well armed.

Before going to bed, after the plate of rice, I look at the map of Mali and take stock of the situation: Adrar (current operation), Gao (future operation), Menaka and Timbuktu (monitor). In the latter two cities, the two units—about 150 men—are isolated. The air force and helicopters can get to them if needed, but they will have to make do on their own for the first hour. In Bamako, Grégoire and his staff are doing all they can to get the AFISMA battalions to take over these outposts, but it takes time, and we no longer have any.

Friday, March 1

The brigade is engaged on two fronts: Gao and the Adrar

Xavier got up at 2 am, time to check in with the TOC, to smoke a cigarette under the starry sky, his eyes fixed on the ridges of the Adrar. This old soldier is with his paratroopers in thought. At 5 am, all hands are on deck in silence. With a canteen cup full of water, everyone manages to wash up using the vehicles' exterior mirrors. It's going to be a long day.

Before the day gets hot, Desmeulles engages his units to seize the northern heights of the valley. He first sends reconnaissance out to a series of parallel ridges, a maze of black rocks that can stop you in your tracks. Light infantry paratroopers on the left, his three legionnaire companies in the center, and on the right support in the immediate vicinity.

Our maps are not accurate, but we follow them with our fingers crossed. CAT 4 has priority. The fighting begins quickly as we approach the valley. The Tigers take off and go back and forth to Tessalit, the time to stock up on fuel and ammunition. Things are heating up in the Adrar, with all the boulders and caves. Everyone knows it. I told them the day before: no rush, no overlap. This is the best way to fend off and kill attackers, by preventing them from using indirect fire, i.e. artillery.

The three lead units are maneuvering. In the middle, just after setting out, the 2nd Company of the Foreign Legion Para Rgt came across 15 camouflaged jihadists a few yards from their bivouac area. Firing reflexes made the difference. The warrant officer in charge of the section, accompanied by two legionnaires, Japanese and Portuguese, climbed a rock wall to find and destroy the defenders who were about to shoot at us. The fight ended deep inside some caves with a grenade. Sixty years earlier, their predecessors from the 1st Foreign Legion Para Rgt had devised an effective assault technique to "clean up" the caves where the rebels were

hiding. Throw a grenade in it, then burst in with a MAT-49 submachine gun at the hip, firing steadily in an arc. The Taznady method—named after its inventor—has changed little, and even though simple, hours and hours of training are spent on it.

The paratroopers advance and approach the valley. They arrive at the hamlet called Ametettai, a few stone houses between the bushes built on sandy gravel. Desmeulles is right where he needs to be, but risks being caught between two lines if the pistons at the east and west entrances do not maintain the pressure. The Chadians and CAT 3 have been blocked by mines for two days. To win, the enemy must be pushed back simultaneously on two or three sides. In our jargon, we must cross a threshold called a "major effect" that will make success inevitable. Before noon, I order CAT 3 to blow through the impasse and link up as soon as possible. I ask the Chadian detachment to do the same, despite their vehicles that still need to be repaired. We have to speed up, even if it means taking risks. The Tigers continue their supply drops. Ammunition is running low as the hours go by.

At the same time, Denis reports to me on the fighting in the South. "*The AIFVs and Gazelle HOT are engaged with a MUJWA katiba… fighting is going on in the South as well.*" Infantrymen, armored vehicles, helicopters, artillerymen, and pilots are all engaged against an enemy that does not want to surrender.

I take advantage of some relative calm to take stock of our next missions, the next valleys of the Adrar. Looking at the inventory of capabilities, I urge Denis to get the company with armored personnel carriers (APC) from Menaka.

Both CPs are working well. The G08 FCP in Tessalit is in charge of operations. The main CP in Gao is working on Operation Doro and, at the same time, facilitates Tessalit's work: intel, maps, and photos are sent by satellite. Logistical convoys leave Gao for the Adrar under the command of 25-year-old officers. Success depends on them too. Dozens of tons of water, fuel, ammunition, and parts are expected. Mirage 2000 and Rafale patrols take turns dropping their bombs on "laser-illuminated" positions. The heat is stifling.

To the west, the armored squadron has entered the valley. In the east, nothing new. In the center, the paratroopers cross the valley, supported by artillery and anti-tank missiles that destroy camouflaged vehicles, resistance, and fugitives. Paratroopers from the 1st PCR have just taken a thirsty prisoner. He surrendered, shouting not to shoot and that he is

French. We will call him "Djamel the Grenoblois." Bamako and Paris are immediately notified.

In the South, the Gauls' positions are being repeatedly attacked

In the South, after being attacked by a group of jihadists, the Gauls from the 92nd identified a concentration of troops and vehicles in the Imenas area. The infantrymen were harassed several times. Taking advantage of the capabilities of their newer infantry fighting vehicles, they successfully engaged the enemy more than a mile away. However, the disembarked sections quickly came up against dozens of maneuvering combatants and had to use their on-board weapons. The Malians' windshields are shattered. The 4th Company from the 92nd is being attacked from every direction. Sharpshooters perched on a hill repeatedly come under attack. The enemy is within grenade range and the riflemen defend themselves with handguns to avoid being overwhelmed. All of them remember Uzbeen. The line is holding. A section of three AIFVs climb the steep slope to connect with the section fighting on foot and prevent them from being wiped out. They engage the enemy with cannon and machine gun fire. The enemy retreats, leaving several dead before immediately reattacking the sections and the infantry in battle. The captain maneuvers his sections of 30 to 40 men. In the wadi, a BRDM 2 armored infantry vehicle is spotted! Infantrymen infiltrate and destroy it with anti-tank rockets at close range. The jihadists are still attacking, tying up three of the four sections. Armed helicopters and planes fire on camouflaged positions in the wadi.

In the middle of the afternoon, after losing several dozen attackers, the enemy retreated. Lacking artillery, the company pursued them with 81 mm mortars. The fighting was violent, and was conducted as if it were a combat exercise at the infantry firing range in Larzac, near Millau. Once again the combat exercises paid off, as did the infantry's equipment and their new AIFVs, the only vehicles that could climb the besieged hill and rescue the snipers.

Solitary trip in the Ametettai, return with Djamel the Grenoblois

In the Adrar, the battle has reached a milestone. The western piston has made it through the mined pass. The center of the valley is now cut in two. In the evening, the men stay put and keep a watchful eye on the enemy positions. The artillery has fired several hundred shells, and the mortars are out of shells. A Transall has just landed with the expected cargo of explosive ordnance. Pretty much recovered, sensing that the fights are momentarily over in the South, I ask the CP to organize a trip to the Ametettai during the night to get an update from CAT 4. My two body-

guards and assistant are getting ready. False alarm, the helicopters are full of shells and there is no way we can postpone the logistics maneuver. The pilot can take one person, no one else. I embark alone in the middle of the ammunition crates. We make our first stop at nightfall; about 20 Bigors arrive running, most of them shirtless, their fatigue pants whipped by the wind of the rotor. Without a word, arms reach out for the wooden crates and the men hurry back to their battery barrels a little further down. Visions reminiscent of other wars. Before taking off, an infantryman hops into the Puma with a hooded and tied man, Djamel the prisoner. We land again after a few minutes of flight, at the foot of a rocky barrier where CAT 4 has set up its CP. As soon as the cargo is unloaded, the Pumas head back for another ammo run. "*Beautiful landscape, black rocks, sand, shrubs. The faces are burned red. The men are tired but smiling, a fine unit, a fine operation.*" I take a tour of the CP, the time to see everyone at their posts. "*Colonel Desmeulles shows me the rock bar half a mile away, where his company destroyed 15 terrorists. The Ametettai Valley is rather open and rocky knolls are everywhere. I understand better why advancing is so difficult. With binoculars, I see the deserted houses of Ametettai. Night falls.*" Artillery and missile fire illuminate the valley floor. We share a ration, sitting on a large stone, and talk about the next steps in the operation, the role of support and the need to link up with CAT 3 and the Chadians. In the middle of nowhere, a legionnaire brings me a beer, probably the only one. Respect for the hierarchy! Suddenly, the loudspeaker of the armored CP crackles to life. An APC has just hit a mine. The NCO who is making his rounds with the water boxes reports, grunting with his strong non-French accent. This is the second time he has hit an explosive charge since this morning. He escaped again unscathed, the wheels and the bed of the armored vehicle took the brunt of it. The vehicle is damaged, the roads are "polluted."

By 9:30 pm, the Pumas are back. It is dark and impossible for them to land in this small valley between two black bars. The dust rises immediately, causing the teams to lose their bearings despite their experience. Small wild donkeys run between the bushes. With Desmeulles, we set off again along the road toward another more open area, a mile away. The APC avoids the roads and we cling to the handles. Djamel is next to us, under watchful eye. A Puma lands in total darkness, to pick up the prisoner and his guard, then we fly over the rugged terrain of the Adrar to Tessalit. The prisoner is next to me. I have nothing to say to him. He will say nothing, keeping his head down. We have chosen two different destinies and we assume them. As the rocky sandbars pass underneath, I tell myself

that the western gate has been breached and the paratroopers have taken up position in the valley. Our men look like winners, tired but determined. However, the affair is not over and a tragedy is bound to happen. The resistance will harden. Djamel threw himself on the first bottle of water that was handed to him. His accomplices who are still on the run will cling to the wells, small holes dug at the bottom of the wadi. Without water, they are condemned to retreat or die quickly. In the valley, the fight for their control will intensify.

Welcomed by Xavier at midnight, we review the operations in the Adrar and Gao, the convoys, and the logistical situation. We have enough to last three days. That's enough to keep the pace up and give the units what they need. As for the machines, the HU mechanics work at night to avoid the heat. Illuminated by neon lights, they check the helicopter engines to extend their lease on life, in other words, to clear them for flight. On the other hand, parts are still missing for the armored vehicles. The units advanced with the supplies they took with them from France, but little is left after the raids and the heat has not helped any.

It's 1 am. I barely settle into bed when we are alerted by the TOC. The *Atlantic*, a maritime patrol boat specialized in surface observation, has just detected five pickups six miles from CAT 3, which leads us to believe the enemy is trying to withdraw to the south. The possible presence of hostages in the area makes us both attentive and cautious. The artillerymen are put on alert and fire a first adjustment shot in the vicinity of the vehicles. Since aerial observation does not detect suspicious movements or bound prisoners, destructive shots are fired at the vehicles. This combined operation lasted only a few minutes in the middle of the night, and took the enemy completely by surprise. The Bigors go back to bed, most of them had no time to get dressed and took part in the firing sequence in underpants and sandals.

Saturday, March 2

Day 5. "The hour of the brave," the hour of Cédric Charenton

Like every morning and evening, we attend a briefing with the TOC and everyone explains their area of specialization (intel, tactics, logistics, or communications) before the chief of staff's summary. Here we are in the valley to flush out the resistance, which is only a matter of time, and to take over the wells. I ask that the valley's main roads be monitored, as I fear infiltration and mines being laid "under the wheels." The CATs' advance will create new burdens in a massif which is far from being qualified as secure. We have to think and anticipate all the dirty tricks the enemy

could pull on us. While the TOC requests air surveillance missions over the night targets, I am focused on the changing situation in the Niger bend with my main CP. The situation there is calm again. I am also thinking of improvements to the overall operation, and especially how to anticipate enemy actions and put the best units and capabilities (infantry, armored vehicles, helicopters, and support) where they are needed, before they are needed. For each red arrow on the map, you have to be able to put a blue arrow in the opposite direction to contain or destroy your adversary, if not to surprise them. This is one of the simple principles of the National War College, which should never be overlooked. Grégoire will be visiting soon, and I suspect that I will get some guidance on the operation's future.

Resistance is intensifying in the Ametettai. At 8 am, the companies caught a few fighters who were trying to escape to the north. The sections find caches containing mines, ammunition, weapons, radios, and telephones. Tiger and Gazelle helicopters detect and destroy camouflaged vehicles. By mid-morning, the Chadians have resumed their advance in the valley and know that the French are only a few hundred yards from their front lines. They soon come upon a strip of mines with complex firing devices connected to several buried shells. CAT 4's forward air controllers and the Chadian contingent coordinate to avoid shooting at the same targets twice and making mistakes: seen from the sky, a Chadian pickup looks a lot like a jihadist pickup! The caves are searched and grenades are thrown into them. Terrorists on the defensive are neutralized, some within two yards. Aircraft bombs, anti-tank missiles, and armored vehicle fire are guided by the forward units, which also take advantage of artillery fire to expose themselves as little as possible. However, snipers are still detected and infantry maneuvers will be needed to take them out. All day long, the units are fighting in the shadows of boulders and between wells. At the same time, the two pistons (Chadians and CAT 3) advance and discover buried positions, vehicles, and a lot of ammunition.

In the afternoon, Grégoire arrives, accompanied by the first journalists. Communications calls me with an important phone call. I head to the office, whose only door is a parachute canvas, and I pick up the phone with Colonel Desmeulles. He tells me that one of his Raptors was killed during an assault on a jihadist position. "*It was too good to be true.*" I am overcome by feelings of solitude and sorrow. I look at the map of Adrar hanging on the wall and see again the white cross of Albert Compain in this small village in Charente. I think about a family that will be notified 3,000 miles away in France. In these moments, you need to bury your emotions to stay on course and not be distracted from the mission. Yet,

despite all the bombing from support, the infantry have to walk the last 300 yards on their own and, if necessary, launch an assault. This is what the airborne infantry from the 1st PCR have just done heroically, after the position had been hit by a laser-guided bomb, an anti-tank missile, and several shells. I would later learn that one of them had carried the lifeless body of his fellow soldier in an attempt to save him, in vain, while the others were strafing the rocks and cave entrances. Running on these big black and burning stones will result in some serious sprains. Everyone had removed the all too visible sand-colored canvas helmet cover. The position will finally be taken in the evening. None of the enemy surrendered and one of them was shot as he was about to return fire with a heavy machine gun. Corporal Cédric Charenton died for France, weapon in hand, hit in the head, but we must carry on. Group cohesion is essential.

At the forward CP, everyone works in silence. The directives from Paris are clear: clean up the valleys of the Adrar, "plant the flag" in the northern towns on the Algerian border so the jihadists understand that we are determined to go to the ends of Mali, and that there are no longer any safe havens or places of refuge in this country. At the same time, I understand that the pressure is strong to start withdrawing units as soon as possible, to reduce our personnel in country. In the short term, my priority is to recover the troops from Menaka and Kidal as soon as possible to reinforce CAT 3. Furthermore, I cannot touch the CAT 2 in Gao, which is barely sufficient, and swapping the two battalions to take advantage of the AIFVs would be too risky. This would mean leaving Gao or the east of the Adrar undermanned for three days, an option unthinkable now that we have the enemy in sight. However, I do understand the political need not to get bogged down and to keep the right volume of forces during the stabilization phase. We must move quickly and take advantage of the battalions in the Adrar and the Niger bend for reconnaissance and to neutralize AQIM and MUJWA in its wadis before allowing the Malian army, which is in the process of being rebuilt, and AFISMA to take up the torch.

In the evening, CAT 4 linked up with the Chadians in the east and CAT 3 in the west. The valley is taken. The enemy is cut off from the wells. At the FCP, everyone understood that the battle was about to be won, but the death of Corporal Charenton had struck a blow to morale and it was no time to celebrate. The stomach flu made its rounds of the CP. Now it was Rémi's turn. I isolate myself to write to Cédric Charenton's parents. I search for the right words so as not to fall into a cold formalism, to console his father and mother who lost their son who died a hero. This indispensable duty is the responsibility of the leader.

Sunday, March 3

Day 6. "The dungeon has fallen," open-air terrorist stockpiles

Short night, sick again. We follow the ongoing fighting around the village of Ametettai. Some jihadists try to get close to the wells; others resist and go down fighting. Despite the shell shock, their unfazed behavior leads us to believe they are using drugs. Throughout this campaign, we will find evidence of ketamine, a general anesthetic used by doctors and veterinarians, a "horse remedy" that inhibits fear and suppresses pain—the perfect kamikaze potion. The searches and skirmishes were made more complicated by the intermingling with our Chadian allies, who recover their share of the spoils, vehicles, weapons, and even a yellow bulldozer that was used to dig trenches and holes for armed pickups. After having contacted the colonels by satellite phone, I go out to the runway to meet the chief of staff of the Chadian army and two generals who have come to see their troops. It's 10 am, my next stop is the central strip behind the CP. The corporal's body has been placed in a green plastic body box and covered with a French flag. Our Chadian allies insisted on attending this short, simple ceremony. It is a "*farewell for a soldier on the field of battle, under the burning sun of Africa, between an AMX-10RC tank, helicopters, in front of the Foreign Legion Para Rgt CP.*" The final orders for the day: "*Today, the French flag will be flown at half-mast by all our regiments. See in it, Cedric, a beautiful and simple tribute of an entire army and country, of a nation that has lost one of its own, one of its best, because one of the most generous, a son of France who died a hero. Rest in peace, Cédric, you made the final stretch with panache, à la française. You performed your duty to the end. Your memory will remain in our hearts, your smile in our memories. With a heavy heart, we salute you one last time. The army, your family, will never forget you. Farewell, Corporal, farewell Cédric. May Saint Michael watch over you forever.*" The square presents arms and we sing the "Paratrooper's Prayer," a solemn and hard song at the same time, more suited than ever to the situation. A van takes our fallen soldier to the airfield where a Transall awaits to fly him to Bamako, the first stop before France.

Before his departure for Bamako, Grégoire has a word with the Chadian generals. We are following the progress of the fighting in Ametettai. Our allies are crossing our lines and crossing the two CATs toward the west. They must reach the valley exit, where I had fuel tankers sent, before joining their bivouac area in Aguelhok on the Trans-Saharan. We insist on coordinating our movements to avoid friendly fire and tragedy. In the scope of a tank or helicopter, nothing resembles a jihadist more

than an ally without a helmet armed with a Kalashnikov rifle, especially as they search the terrain, neutralize isolated combatants, and evacuate camouflaged vehicles. The two French CATs widen their area of action, the paratroopers to the south of the hamlet called Ametettai, the Porpoises further west at the place called the Garage, where artillerymen and airmen had hit the regrouped enemy on the afternoon of the 27th. The place is aptly named. We find artillery pieces, stolen from the Malian army, ammunition, shells, vehicles, and spare parts scattered in the crevices of the terrain, such as a new pickup engine placed between two rocks, or computers and laptops camouflaged with anti-tank rockets. This position marks the entrance to the In Tegant valley, which is in the shape of a comma south of the Ametettai, on the western half of the massif. It's hot as hell, and the men have been on the ground for almost a week. They hold the wells, and the units will be able to occupy the northern borders where some resistance remains. Helicopters fly over the Adrar, as do Mirage and Rafale aircraft, in search of fugitives. After a plate of rice, I allow myself an hour's rest, struck by the bad stomach flu that has been raging in the camp and exhausting our bodies that have been overworked since January.

A phase of dialogue begins with the "future maneuver" cells of the CPs in Tessalit and Gao. I get them thinking long term, the withdrawal of our forces, and the medium and short term: the valleys of In Tegant and Terz in the Adrar, the northern towns on the Algerian border, but also the wadis of the greater Gao, reconnaissance missions in the Niger bend, and searches around Timbuktu. Staff work is about to begin. Based on these goals, a timetable of operations will be drawn up. The sequencing takes into account priorities coming down from Paris and an ongoing constructive dialogue between Bamako and Gao, in liaison with the air force in N'Djamena and Lyon Mont-Verdun. As on January 27th or February 25th, the role of the general is to anticipate future actions, have them prepared by staff officers and sense what is feasible in terms of time, the means available, acceptable risks, and human capacity. These responsibilities require us to be vigilant, to respect the principles of combat as we learn them throughout our career, and not to make any unwise compromises. Armored, airborne, airmobile, and infantry raids and night missions on the Niger River allowed us to detect and destroy the enemy, but they must be prepared without precluding emergency missions in response. This campaign was the result of methodical and prolonged work by small, well-led teams, each directed by their own chief of staff who acted as rigorous and imaginative as any orchestra conductor would.

The Battle of Ametettai is not over. The Greater Gao has not been fully searched, but we must continue to impose our rhythm, surprise the enemy, keep them from coming up for air, and react in a coordinated manner. Within both CPs, the teams are hard at work.

The time to get a small basin and a little water from the well, and I am back to a much simpler and infinitely smaller reality, that of washing clothes, my fatigues, and hanging them to dry in record time on a rope. Before they leave for the CATs, I receive the first journalists who have arrived in Tessalit, explaining the general situation to each of them and taking the time to answer their questions. Over the next few weeks, in Adrar as well as in the South, I will be happy to see those from Timbuktu and others like Olivier Fourt, Jean-Philippe Rémy, Tanguy Berthemet, and Nathalie Guibert. My military assistant gives me an update on the wounded in the field hospital right next to the CP. At 5 pm, I invite the Chadian generals to visit their men. One is in the operating room, the others lie waiting to be evacuated next to ours. "*Visit to the wounded, psychologically scarred, many sprains in the rocks. The men are very tired from the fighting and the heat. Looks do not deceive.*"

An infantryman's life was saved again thanks to his helmet. We have come a long way in a century. As I set the helmet down on the folding chair, I see once again the Adrian helmet of infantryman Marcel Pieuchot, pierced in the same place, a blue metallic helmet with holes on both sides. Killed on August 20, 1918, at Bieuxy during the offensive on Soissons, at 23 years old, after four years of war, the young Burgundian was the only son of a modest couple of craftsmen, an unknown and terribly endearing hero, found by chance while doing historical research. Since this encounter, his photo is never far from that of the Vendée stretcher-bearer, father of Albert Compain.

During the evening briefing, after the situation update of current missions, we learn of the birth of Martin, the son of a young commander who is drafting the future plans. Life goes on while our families are waiting for us. Important news (deaths and births) are relayed by the CP in Gao.

During the day, Denis told me about the launch of Operation Doro 2 since the early morning. The Gauls joined Imenas in AIFV to try to surprise the MUJWA near the previous contact zone. At the same time, in Timbuktu, the armored reconnaissance unit went several dozen miles outside the city. The atmosphere at the FCP is more relaxed again.

The officers of the 11th and 3rd Brigades, the aviator, all are together and quickly inseparable. This week of doubts and progress has united

them. In the camp, water is limited, but at a rate of 2 or 3 liters per person, you can take a shower every other day in a small room in the building, or behind a vehicle.

Monday, March 4

"The Terrorist Woodstock," the shock of child soldiers

This is the seventh day of the offensive. "*I will greet the Chadian generals who are leaving to catch their plane. Franco-Chadian friendship. Relaxed atmosphere. The paratroopers put the weapons in front of the CP. All these spoils piled high looks like victory: cubic yards of ammunition and weapons that I will offer to the Malians to re-equip them."* Most of these weapons come from their stockpiles that were looted by the jihadists last year. The CP officers prepare the next operations and show me a timetable in the afternoon that is aligned with requests from Paris. The logistical update clearly shows fatigue and wear and tear on personnel and equipment, as evidenced by evacuations for heatstroke and the unavailability of armored vehicles. Overworked for more than a month without a real break, our old mounts are running out of steam: the AMX-10RC tanks and the APCs are breaking down. The armored squadron that supports CAT 4 has only half of its tanks left. The APC company is running out of tires. The terrain and the rocks are very sharp. In the south, the AIFVs are holding up perfectly, but the shortage of components is beginning to take its toll as well. The spare parts are still in France or in Bamako. All these future operations can only take place after everything has been restored.

Searches continue. More than ever, we fear entanglements with hidden survivors, newly laid mines, and occasional offensive maneuvers. The units comb the valleys, uncovering tons of gear and weapons, mine factories, booby traps, notebooks of the perfect terrorist in training, computers, and first aid equipment. A veritable terrorist Woodstock was coming together at the gates of Europe and our country, in the Adrar—the water tower of the desert. By taking this valley, we have the impression that we have breached the "dungeon" and emptied its store houses. Some men surrendered, thirsty and dazed, some half deaf after the barrage of artillery, bombs, tank, and helicopter shells pounded them.

The legionnaires find a child soldier with shrapnel wounds. Hiding under a blanket by a low stone wall, he is shivering with fever, powerless to stop the infection of his wounds. He has been waiting two to three days for death, like this other wounded jihadist, found under a rock with an infusion in his arm, leaning against his crates of ammunition. The only big difference is that this one is probably not even 15 years old. This dis-

covery and the one that will follow undoubtedly marked a turning point for the brigade's soldiers. The Chadians had warned us after the attack on the 22nd that child soldiers were being used in the valley, but finding a wounded and unarmed one hits us hard as a soldier and a father. This reality brings us back to the ancestral practices of slavery, the opposite of our conception of life, of respect for others, or simply of the code of honor of the French soldier, which we all carry in the form of an 11-point card in our fatigues pocket. We understood that day, for those who doubted it, that our adversary was not worthy.

As soon as he was discovered, the child soldier was taken care of by the legionnaires' nurses and then by the company doctor who requested his emergency evacuation by helicopter, which was done despite the risks. He will make it out alive. A few hours later, the same unit sets up a tactical bivouac, in a hedgehog configuration to repel any attack at night. As soon as he arrived, Warrant Officer M. notices tracks in the sand between the rocks and the shrubs. He sees a small foot behind a branch. Sensing his cover was blown, an armed combatant leaped out and was immediately shot down. The legionnaires discover in this cache two armed children and a black, English-speaking adult who later confessed to being Nigerian and affiliated with the Boko Haram sect. After having abducted a dozen children, mainly Fulani, in the Gao region, he took them to this safe haven to indoctrinate them and turn them into good little jihadists. The warrant officer will tell me afterwards that he was convinced when he caught them that they were waiting for the night to attack the men in their tents. Their AK-47s were fully loaded and the children were huddled around their tutor. In the hours that followed, combat engineers and infantrymen discovered the bodies of children in the valley, some loaded with empty canteens, sent to their death by thirsty jihadists.

These visions will leave my soldiers with invisible wounds, as the camp chaplain and the doctor explain to me. They had just spent ten days' fighting under a Sahelian sun, but the images haunted them, some even wondering if they had unknowingly shot a kid who was the age of their son. The child soldier: the worst discovery of this cursed valley! After the mines, the assaults, the fighting in the caves, no one expected this. In the battalions, the men are warned. However, in the following weeks, none of them will seek revenge or treat the few prisoners we have taken inappropriately. All of them will remain professional, without succumbing to their killer instincts and the temptation of expeditious justice. A few days later, two more child soldiers will be captured. Like a slave, the first carried empty bottles and a bag for a group of three armed jihadists, shot at close

range. In a split second, the advancing legionnaires had barely saved their own skins and the kid's, who was surprised to make it out alive. Training and luck saved the day. The second was wounded by a sentry a few dozen yards from his tent. The enemy was trying to infiltrate the camp under the cover of the vegetation. Luck, again! He was superficially wounded in the leg and brought in before being treated and evacuated to Tessalit. Glassy-eyed, as if they were drugged, these kids were used as porters, messengers, or scouts. Kidnapped in the Niger bend or from families of shepherds further north, they will later be sent to Bamako to follow a United Nations-led reintegration program.

Tuesday, March 5

"Cleaning the moat"

Xavier, always faithful and close to his men, monitors the situation without putting any unnecessary pressure on the TOC. He knows his little CP from Toulouse, Abidjan, Gao, and now Tessalit. The officers are wondering where the hostages are, are they in the Adrar, right under the noses of our vanguard units? At the brigade level, there is no intel to suggest this or to attempt an operation with the two CATs. I call my main CP which tells me that two young journalists are no longer in Gao, that they are heading north with a Malian guide and his vehicle toward Bourem and Tessalit. To do nothing is to take the risk of having two more hostages in the short term. They are reportedly located 20 miles to the north, in an unsecured village. I immediately order an armored patrol be dispatched and helicopters to protect them and bring them back to Gao, which is done in two hours. In addition, I ask that the two available loudspeakers be sent up to dissuade the jihadists, especially the children, from continuing to fight, to encourage them to come out of hiding and surrender. These loudspeakers can be heard for several hundred yards. They will serve in the Ametettai and Terz valleys, where translators will deliver our surrender messages in Arabic and Tamasheq, the language of the Tuaregs.

Having learned of the upcoming visit of the Minister of Defense, we prepare a short and intense schedule focusing on the people and the reality on the ground. It is time to step back and anticipate future operations. My discussions with the Chadian generals convinced me that our allies would resume the movement after a short period of resupply in their Aguelhok bivouac area further south. They will close the routes in the southern Adrar by settling in the Assamalmal Valley, bordered by the Tigharghar cliffs to the north and the oases of the "garden camp" to the south, areas of dunes and bas-reliefs extending to Kidal, 60 miles to

the south. Not to leave them stranded and to give them support, I offered them a section of heavy mortars and a senior officer to ensure coordination of our sorties and our fire, in addition to the liaison team which ensures the liaison with Tessalit. Leaning over our maps, with Xavier and the small "future maneuver" team, we consider our next moves. The half-valley of In Tegant stands out as an immediate objective, the Terz valley a secondary objective. My units have been in this oven for over a week. Dehydration and the stomach flu are taking their toll. The field hospital's extra tent is full. However, I decide to continue the search in In Tegant in the coming days. We will take this small valley in two coordinated movements: CAT 3 from the Garage will continue to the east, CAT 4 from north to south. All our tactical intelligence is focused on the southern Ametettai. By satellite, I call Gao back after reading the reports of operations in the Southern Zone of the Niger bend.

In Timbuktu, the squadron carries on its job of protecting the runway. They are sending out more and more patrols to monitor the area, talk to the people, and dissuade the enemy from regrouping to attack. In Gao, CAT 2 returned to Imenas. They found a lot of ammunition. Intel suggests that this area is a safe haven and logistical base for the MUJWA. Operation Doro 2 continues, involving AIFV companies, combat engineers, and the two Caesar howitzers of the 68th Afr Arty Rgt, which has finally arrived, to support the infantrymen. Our Malian allies follow us in pickups, supported by the liaison teams that we have attached to them to avoid friendly fire, to support them with artillery or aerial fire and helicopters to evacuate their wounded if necessary. At the end of the morning, the directions are given, the situation is clear. The brigade is fully engaged, in the wadis, from north to south. Logisticians are actively involved in securing bases. I call Grégoire for an update and to know a little more about Paris' intentions to start withdrawing units. I take this opportunity to ask him to make preparations to receive prisoners in Bamako. This type of mission is manpower-intensive, yet it is essential. "*The prisoners, a Nigerian from Boko Haram, two kids from Gao, and Djamel: pitiful, poor Africa. What a dirty war.*" I don't feel any hatred, just compassion for the children sitting on the floor with haggard eyes. They are the same age as our children and yet they know about guns. The doctor has examined them and they are well fed.

At the field hospital, the operating room is still occupied. Our doctors are leaning over the wounded child who arrived by helicopter. He was borderline dehydrated and septic. I'll never forget the image of these little crossed arms, of these little feet placed on the table and of the medical

staff who are trying to save him, to bandage him and sew him up. This one will be narrowly saved. Two days ago, the child wanted to kill us. Before falling asleep, he asked the anesthetist if he could join the French army. I leave the operating room and congratulate the head doctor with a pat on the shoulder. These military doctors are among the best. They practice in Lyon, Toulon, and Marseilles in military hospitals open to the public. They are regularly deployed in operations, embedded in vanguard units or placed in advanced field hospitals. They are general practitioners, orthopedists, but also specialists in burns and war surgery. Their nurses are dedicated and as members of our military, they have a thorough understanding of our units and their constraints. Their perspective is often different and their advice is invaluable to a leader, as soon as trust is established.

Bigeard's onions

In the Adrar, the infantry is advancing slowly, neutralizing some isolated resistance along the way. I decide to take advantage of the helicopters' logistical rotations to review the two CATs in the valley before seizing In Tegant. I also want to discuss future orders with Desmeulles (CAT 4) and to inspect the valley entrance that Gougeon (CAT 3) will be making his way through. This time, a bodyguard, my military assistant, Colonel Gout, and the chief of operations of the G08 FCP come with me. We leave Tessalit for the valley by day. The CAT 4 CP is located at the foot of a rocky sandbar with small orchards surrounded by thorny trees, probably to keep the donkeys at bay. An APC ML with its large satellite antenna and a tarp, under which some wooden crates have been placed, acts as a CP. The sand-covered backpacks are lined up along the thorn trees. Since our last night meeting with CAT 4, the valley has been conquered. From the top of the rocky outcrop, we see a few hard barracks, the main objective of Ametettai; behind, the northern ridges overlooked by a stone bunker, the one where Charenton fell three days earlier. The orchard is set up around a well, a hole two yards in diameter and five deep. The jihadists abandoned the motor pump. The tomato plants have dried up, but the eggplants fared better. On the right, I recognize rows of onions. The onion, the blessed vegetable of the soldier in the middle of nowhere, the best compromise between weight and vitamins. Seeing these onions planted by the enemy, I remember reading as a teenager *For a Plot of Glory* by General Bigeard, and particularly a passage dedicated to the virtues of the onion, the indispensable food of his paratroopers. History will repeat itself in Mali. To supplement the rations, jihadist onions were quickly dug up and distributed to the soldiers in the Adrar. Unable to be supplied with fruit and vegetables, the brigade will find in this providential and immedi-

ately available vegetable an essential supplement to keep them going for the weeks to come. The rare showers are limited to a little well water, the meals to rations and onions.

The Puma will come back to the position. We take the time to review the map and discuss the next mission: In Tegant, the "rock camp" and the "sand camp," two suspicious areas to search. The units are baked dry. The armored vehicles are showing signs of fatigue. Several of them had to be evacuated "by cable," i.e. pulled by a tow rope, to Tessalit. However, the work must continue and be completed. The helicopter lands, lifting a fine cloud of sand that covers the paratroopers' bags and gets everywhere. After a few minutes of flying in the valley, we join the Camel company, in observation at the Garage, opposite the entrance of the In Tegant valley. Porpoise sections are mixed with the combat engineers who cleared the minds at the entrance to the Ametettai. I meet up with my two great captains, and we discuss whether we think the men and our equipment can take much more of this. They give me an inventory of what they've found: vehicles, buried workshops invisible from the sky, spare parts spread out among the rocks, and scattered ammunition. They also found a jihadist orchard, a well, and the well pump, which gives the men a chance to wash, cool off, and recover before the next operation. Even if the conditions are grueling, we are fortunate to be a part of this extraordinary operation, far from the daily toil of our forces back in France. Time flies by too fast, and I don't have enough of it to stop at Gougeon's CP. The Puma has returned from Tessalit with its cargo of water and ammunition. The dust flies everywhere.

Africans and paratroopers: a sacred union for victory

The atmosphere is more relaxed at the CP in Tessalit. With Xavier and the chief of operations, we review the final details for In Tegant, taking into account our exchanges in the evening with Desmeulles, Gout, the captains at the Garage, and Gougeon. We refine our intel requests for reconnaissance and drones. Armed helicopter patrols leave Tessalit for the south of the Adrar, monitoring the valleys and possible exfiltration routes. Like every evening, I write, with my MA, the daily assessment report that is sent to Bamako and Paris. The CP in Gao is working perfectly. In silence, it supplies the small G08 FCP with the digital assets it needs for operations and logistics. It summarizes the reports of the four outposts (Tessalit, Gao, Timbuktu, and Menaka), distinguishing between the Niger bend and the Adrar, and prioritizes requests sent up the chain of command, to the CP in Bamako. Every day, I am amazed by my excellent chief of staff's calm demeanor and professionalism. After a year of intensive training in the

French military deserts, he also had the satisfaction of seeing his staff, his communications team play their part. The temperatures, the distances, and the equipment deployed are different, but the mechanisms, the working methods are down pat, the teams know each other, the capacities are under control. The *new additions*, officers attached to his Clermont-Ferrand team, quickly integrated into the 3rd Brigade's CP, now the Serval Brigade CP. Sterile and fratricidal turf wars have no place among dedicated servants of the state. Union, a term so dear to General de Monsabert, is not an empty word.

Night has fallen on Tessalit. A young and talented commander, a cavalry officer, is smiling. He learned of the birth of his son, Martin, in France. The evening situation update begins and the designated officer presents me with the next operations including an upcoming raid on the Algerian border, conceived by the young father. The proposed name of the operation is bland and lacking panache. It is a rugged cavalry mission that CAT 3 will lead two days later. With everyone's assent, I decide to the surprise the father by naming the operation after Martin, turning to the stunned and happy officer: "*It's his first gift, you can explain it to him later!*"

The sun set on the Timetrine to the left of the small CP building, above the field hospital. A slight breeze drifts through the camp. "Chicken" is at work again. This stout and warm-hearted NCO from the FCP is the pennant bearer of the airborne brigade. He is well respected at the CP. During the day, he sorts and distributes paper and digital messages within the TOC. In the evening, with his communicators, he organizes the "mess hall," a moment of R&R where everyone gathers in front of the building to share memories, information, celebrate a birthday, or tell a good story. A moment of cohesion sometimes accompanied by a beer or a drink, depending on the arrivals, and shared field rations. Tonight, Chicken made a giant couscous from several rations in a large aluminum bowl. We enjoy every last bit of it, accompanied by sliced onions. My dutiful driver is looking out for me, handing me another can of Coke to settle my stomach. At the entrance to In Tegant, Caesar howitzers fire deep into the entrance of Terz where isolated people are regrouping. My mind wanders to the paratroopers and pilots of the Adrar, my Bisons of Menaka, Porpoises of Timbuktu, Gauls and Africans of Imenas. I imagine the captains giving their orders and the section leaders checking up on the weapons and their men's health for the next missions.

Wednesday, March 6

"How many more will die?"

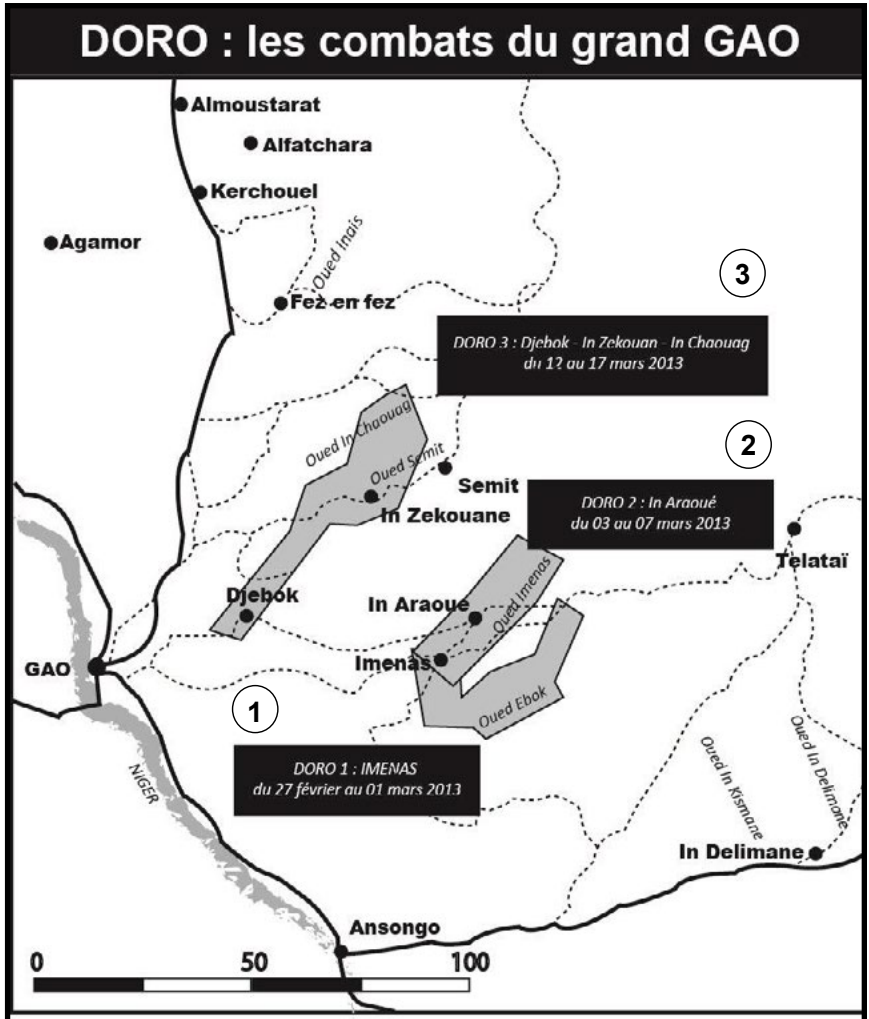
"*Up at 6 am. It's already hot. Shaving in front of the sun that peaks over the Adrar. It's beautiful, reminds me of Fort Saganne. The sand wind picks up, less visibility.*"

We are quickly overtaken by the reality of war. A report reaches us by courier. "*The 1st Company of the 92nd Inf Rgt is engaged in the South. The MUJWA katiba ambushed the Malians: four wounded and one Alpha [very serious], to be evacuated by helicopter. For support, a brand new Tiger and a Gazelle."* Thanks are flaring up again in the South. Bert and his Gauls are caught in a fight with our Malian friends. They surprised the enemy by going into their sanctuary, which was quite different from the Adrar, but firmly held nonetheless. At In Araoué, 75 miles from Gao, the AIFVs raided and took the terrorists by surprise in their wadis—dry valleys covered with thorns for several miles. The objectives, drawn up by our research teams from the ground forces, are precise. The CP intel officers, in liaison with their Malian counterparts, did an excellent job of analysis and synthesis. They located and identified well-camouflaged groups of people. Unlike the first operations, which were carried out blindly north of Gao, these are perfectly targeted.

Chief Brigadier Pingaud killed in action

Early in the morning, the two AIFV companies, partly preceded by the Malian pickups and their French escort detachment, suddenly changed direction to rush to identified enemy positions. Surprised by this movement, the MUJWA terrorists set up a "funnel" and an attack element to flank the Franco-Malian column that was driving around the wadi before entering it. The shock is violent, the terrorists concentrate their fire on the light vehicles to inflict the most losses. Kalashnikov bullets shatter the Malians' windshields. The vehicles are strafed. Chief Brigadier Wilfried Pingaud, a solid African artilleryman, is among them. He had just noticed the start of the firefight and pointed it out to the column, before retaliating with the onboard machine gun of his light armored vehicle. During the fight, he is hit in the head by a bullet. Lieutenant-Colonel Christophe quickly notices that all his armored vehicles are engaged. However, we have to try to free the Malians, who are stuck and under heavy fire. The enemy ambush worked perfectly, the work of professionals. He manages to regroup his detachment slightly behind the others, while protecting our allies who have fallen into line with the French armored vehicles. Anti-tank rockets explode a few yards from the APCs. Air commandos—specialists in air support

guidance—have stopped firing. Under the cover of an embankment, they call for help from a Mirage 2000 patrol armed with laser-guided bombs. Reflexes start to kick in. Everyone knows that Wilfried is seriously injured and that he must be evacuated with four Malian brothers in arms. Armed Gazelle helicopters take off to support the troops on the ground, while a Puma and a Belgian Agusta fly toward the wadi to recover the five wounded soldiers.



1. DORO 1: Imenas. 27 Febrary to 1 March 2013.
2. DORO 2: In Araoué. 3 to 7 March 2013.
3. DORO 3: Diebook – In Zekouan – In Chaouag. 12 to 17 March 2013.

Figure 11. DORO—The Fights for the Enlarged Area of GAO. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

At the same time, the company of Gauls takes over from the Franco-Malian column. The infantrymen from the 92nd open fire, spraying the wadi with bursts from their 25 mm chain guns. Everyone is in their place. No one has forgotten the enemy assaults of Operation Doro 1 a few days earlier. The Malian column is stuck in the center. The enemy is less than 200 yards away. Captain Franck gives his orders quickly. Like during combat exercises, the AIFVs fire, then back up into a different position to avoid remaining in the same spot for too long. Anti-tank rockets hit the empty positions. The sections split up the sectors: one neutralizes the periphery 200 yards away, the other the terrorists who are maneuvering more than 800 yards out. The precision of the cannons and thermal cameras, coupled with Gauls' training and motivation leave no chance for the terrorists, who have just lost about 30 men. Two bombs dropped by Mirages wipe out the remaining resistance in the wadi. Helicopters evacuate the wounded. Pingaud and his Malian brother in arms succumb to their wounds, the three others will be saved by doctors at the field hospital in Gao. The skirmish lasted a few hours. It was extremely violent. The combat exercises carried out in France and the experience of the officers and their men have paid off. Once again, our air force "guardian angels" supported the infantrymen's fire. Our Belgian friends have been engaged alongside their French allies to save lives. There is a real brotherhood of arms with the Belgian army. Their helicopter and transport aircraft pilots were among us. Throughout the campaign, they airlifted much needed supplies between Gao and Tessalit, sometimes taking over from our planes, which had run out of steam. On the remotest airfields, French roundels could often be seen in the company of those from the kingdoms of Belgium and Denmark.

At the forward CP in Tessalit, we are far from the wadis of Greater Gao, but we can guess that morning that a serious reckoning is taking place between the terrorists and the Gauls of CAT 2. We follow in earnest the reports on the operational network, the wounded, the evacuations, and the engagement of armored vehicles and aircraft. "*Faces become serious when they hear one of ours was wounded. We must not suffer, we cannot give up.*" With Xavier, we can imagine Denis, Claude, and Bert leading the maneuver. Each sector has what it needs in terms of support: helicopters, combat engineers, and artillerymen. I am waiting for news from the South. In the meantime, I join the group of journalists in front of the CP. "*I am in discussion with Didier François. It's also an opportunity to get news from France, to get his opinion on the country's support for this operation, the media coverage of this campaign. Xavier informs me of the chief brigadier's death. Peace to his soul, peace to my African artilleryman.*

One more, the 4th of the operation, the 3rd under my command, how many more? Families will be worried back in France."

The news reaches us as we are preparing for the minister's visit. The funeral honors will be given in the afternoon at the edge of the runway of Gao before the body is sent to Bamako and then France; the orders are given, I will go pay homage to my African one last time and I decide to take in the helicopter with me a captain from the 68th Afr Arty Rgt, integrated into the forward CP. She knew Pingaud well. On arrival, Denis greets me surrounded by my loyal subordinates from the 3rd. I have prepared a speech but I soon realize that the deputy chief of staff, chief of the African artillerymen in France, has done the same. Half an hour later, the Transall has landed. The rear ramp is down. The men in Gao are lined up between the hangar and the plane for 100 yards. General Dembélé, head of the Malian army, came to pay homage to the two French and Malian soldiers killed in action. The ceremony is brief, yet dignified. Side by side, we listen to Colonel Lendroit. He asked me if he could deliver a eulogy. I can't refuse him that. He is saying farewell to one of his men. His words are powerful. French and Malian soldiers fell together, weapons in hand, before their fellow soldiers defeated their attackers in the wadi of In Araoué. Our thoughts are with the two families in Bamako and La Valbonne. Wilfried Pingaud was well known in the regiment, a leader who was always willing and exemplary throughout his 18 years of service to France. Having campaigned in Mayotte, Polynesia, the Central African Republic, and Afghanistan, Pingaud was one of those men you knew you could count on. A moment of silence, we salute the two killed, Dembélé stick in hand, scarf around his neck. The ceremony lasted only a few minutes, the Transall has already taken off toward the west. The Gauls and the Franco-Malian detachment continue their search missions further south. There are only two hours left before I leave for Tessalit, where I am to welcome the ministerial delegation the next morning; two hours of work to define a coherent position on the successive withdrawal of troops, the future operations to be carried out in Timbuktu, the upcoming replacement in Menaka by our Nigerien allies, and the reinforcements to consider for the Chadian contingent. With my two deputy commanders in Gao and Tessalit and the two chiefs of staff, everyone is free to express their thoughts and opinions. Each one offers their own perspective and emphasizes their own requirements, underlining the known constraints and the risks involved.

I make the rounds of the tactical operations center in Gao. It's been ten days since I left them, but feels like an eternity! After months of preparation and a month of crossing Mali, we are engaged in several sectors

simultaneously and I am not with them. They know that I will be with the two CATs in the North for an indefinite period of time. They also know that there are more battles ahead, but no one knows how many more will fall on Malian soil. With the modesty that is typical in the military, we exchange a few words, silent glances, and respectful handshakes. Everyone is at their station behind their map, computer, or radio handset. These two base CPs are holding up. They are all there: the cell in charge of liaising with CAT 2, the logisticians who are constantly on the move, the intel officers with their enemy organization charts, objective files, and photos.

I stop by the "future maneuver" office and then the combat engineers, artillerymen, pilots, and our two fully integrated Belgian officers. I take the time to talk with them and to thank them. Their small Belgian flag is next to their computer. My men from the communications company are standing, busily about the computer servers—the CP's nerve center. They cobbled together a makeshift air-conditioning system to cool them down, keeping them at 95 °F instead of the hangar's ambient 115 °F. They never get the recognition they deserve in the press. Without them, this complex architecture of connections and digital data sharing would be impossible, the pace of operations much slower, and our soldiers at higher risk. On permanent duty at the CP, they ensure the immediate security of the hangar day and night. It's going to be dark soon. My team of bodyguards who remained in Gao accompany me. They prepared a small bag of party favors for their colleagues at the FCP in Tessalit: rehydration packs and relatively recent magazines. Before embarking, I call Clermont as I haven't had any news from there since February 24th. Here too, challenges overcome strengthen cohesion. This job is something else. You have to trust and know how to wait without further information. The Puma takes off and heads into the darkness for the land of black stones and jihadist wells.

Thursday, March 7

"Minister's visit: no endgame"

The highlight of the day will be the visit of the minister and his small delegation. It presents a real risk, and instructions have been given to both CATs to be particularly visible. The fighting is not over in the Ametettai. There are still isolated pockets of resistance, and a helicopter is an easy target. Gout and his crews once again carried out a rapid infiltration into the valley, with an emphasis on surprise, i.e. speed and very low altitude. We planned to receive the minister on the edge of the runway in Tessalit for a quick briefing between two machines, a Tiger and an X-10RC tank, in front of a map showing past and future operations in the valleys. After-

wards, we will go to CAT 4's CP to see and talk to the men. This is the best way to get a feel for the terrain, the heat, the distances, and victory as well. Jean-Yves Le Drian is above all a people person. He is aware of the risks, but he wants to understand the situation for himself.

After Timbuktu, this will be his second visit "to the front." There is no honor guard. Everyone is busy and he does not want to disrupt the smooth running of the operation. The first encounter is with Tiger crews who tell of their battles, then a tank leader who describes his armored raids. The briefing is short, a photo will make the front page of the French daily *Le Monde.* The heat seems to get hotter as the minutes pass: 85, then 105 °F. Bulletproof vests and helmets are distributed, the helicopters take off. The minister has removed his tie and is staring at the miles of black rocks. At the entrance to the jihadist orchard, Desmeulles welcomes us with some of his paratroopers and legionnaires. Gougeon is present, representing CAT 3. The explanation from the rocky outcrop, facing the battlefield of the last days is quick, but sufficient to understand the difficulties encountered, to identify the natural bunker we took after several assaults, and the village of Ametettai that is now occupied by a platoon of tanks. The victors of Ametettai are gathered between the orchard and a low stone wall. They put their berets back on while others, wearing helmets, watch the surrounding area. The weapons taken from the enemy are lined up by type: dozens of mortars, heavy machine guns, Kalashnikovs, sniper rifles, ammunition, and explosives. The scene is impressive. The minister's words are simple and encouraging. France is proud of its soldiers. He looks up to see a menacing Tiger flying over the valley. This tactical victory was the result of air-land technology combined with the extreme resilience of the men, the leadership, training, and experience of the units. The military victory in Mali can also be claimed by our industrialists and researchers. It is the result of an assumed political will. It's almost time to leave. Three thousand miles from Paris, with his feet in the sand, the minister sings *La Marseillaise* in unison with the troops. Before getting on the helicopter, he will greet a unique pair of soldiers: father and son. The first, Frédéric, is an experienced non-commissioned officer who serves as a unit warrant officer in the 2nd Mar Inf Rgt's command and logistics company; the second, Xavier, a young Porpoise with two years of service, is a gunner on the X-10RC tank within the 1st platoon of the Crocos Squadron. They are proud to serve their country and honored by this unexpected visit to an insecure area. On their way back, the Pumas fly over Tessalit. CAT 3's armored vehicles head north, toward the Algerian border towns, followed by their water and fuel tanks and their repair trucks. The visit lasted all

morning and will continue in Gao where Denis and the CP officers will explain the ongoing Doro operations. The night before, when he arrived in Bamako, the minister had paid his respects to Chief Brigadier Pingaud, who had died for France. "*The political will is clear and assumed. There is no endgame.*" This day will always be remembered.

Things are picking up again at the CP in Tessalit. This visit is the culmination of ten days of fighting, a month and a half of campaigning. The men are smiling, their morale is strong. The big gap is about to start. Xavier and I take another look at the map of Northern Mali. We see six distinct points moving away, four of which are in motion and therefore more vulnerable. Although the two CATs and their colonels are still in the Adrar, the same cannot be said for some of their units. The paratroopers' armored squadron left early for an Algerian refueling mission five hours away by road, trail, and dune. The other CAT 3 squadron is heading toward Tin Zaoutene and Boughessa near Mali's borders. A logistical convoy of more than 50 vehicles is on its way north from Gao with spare parts, water, and ammunition. Between Aguelhok and the Assamalmal Valley, the LU with the Chadian forces continues its enveloping movement from the south, reinforced by a section of heavy mortars. These distant missions are exceptional in scale and a source of concern for a general and his CP. We have to remain connected with them and to anticipate difficulties. Everyone knows that Murphy's famous law always strikes at the worst possible moment, when and where it is not expected. We make sure that medical evacuation and fire support are guaranteed by air.

Managing fuel and helicopters in Tessalit makes sense. The Puma, Tiger, and Gazelle crews are armed and ready to take off at a moment's notice. These guard and attack dogs will never fail the ground units. Under a blazing sun, donning their camouflaged boonie hats at the top of their big ladders, perched on the Puma engines, or busy at night dismantling the Gazelle and Tiger turbines, their faces lit up by neon lights powered by small generators, the mechanics never stray far from their machines. No helicopters will accidentally crash and missions will be carried out just in time. It was their greatest victory, invisible and yet indispensable.

While units are combing over the Tigharghar, operations continue in the Niger bend. After four days around In Araoué and Imenas, CAT 2 returned to Gao, just in time for the minister's visit. In Timbuktu, the squadron continues to probe, reconnaissance north of the Niger River toward Ber and Gourma Rharous, where we had detected and destroyed enemy pickups attempting to cross. A dozen light armored vehicles advance eastward, while the rest guard the airport with their Malian allies. A Malian ve-

hicle runs over an explosive device—a buried artillery shell—connected to a switch called a pressure plate. The vehicle is destroyed, three soldiers are evacuated by helicopters and admitted as soon as possible to the field hospital in Gao.

Friday, March 8

"Following the leader"

The map, always the map: an armored vehicle on the Septenkero fuel run has broken down. It will be repaired by mechanics in the CAT 3 column which is moving eastward. The equipment is suffering and it takes all the ingenuity of the mechanics to keep these old machines—some older than them—running at such an unbridled pace. They left with the spare parts they could find at their bases a month ago. Getting parts is slow. Fortunately, the enemy does not know this. In the massif, the legionnaires have left the southern ridges of the valley and entered the "rock camp," two miles further south. Fighting has resumed, the enemy was not far away. At very close range, three terrorists are shot dead and a child soldier is captured. The enemy is hungry and thirsty, with no access to a well. At the western entrance of the Ametettai, the company from the 2nd is ordered to advance into the small valley of In Tegant, where the risk of mines is high. Porpoises and combat engineers proceed with caution. The APCs follow, but their tires give up one after the other, pierced by the sharp edges of the black rocks. The "sand camp" is reached, a couple square miles of sand in the middle of this lunar soil, an area of caches similar to the more mineral "rock camp."

The infantrymen inspect the ground movements, crevices, and caves bordering In Tegant and the "rock camp." Outside, the heat is infernal. Desmeulles and I agree to start withdrawing CAT 4 units. With Gout and his CP, we take stock of the airmobile resources at hand. I don't want the paratroopers to have to endure a return trip as difficult as the outbound trip, stuck on the platforms of logistic vehicles. We count all our available helicopters, and it quickly becomes apparent that we cannot afford this luxury. At a maximum of 10 soldiers per Puma, withdrawing several companies of 140 men would require too many helicopter rotations. Our machines have flown a lot and the mechanics are doing their best to keep them passing the technical inspections required for safety, but there is no question of taking a risk with men's lives. In the afternoon, a Foreign Legion Para Rgt company pulls back from the Ametettai in vehicles. Sixty of them are picked up by helicopters. Xavier and I go to meet them when they reach the camp. The only thing on their mind is the paltry comfort of the buildings, the

shade, cardboard boxes used as mattresses, and the water barrel to shave and take a quick shower. I salute Lieutenant Jean-Thomas, commander of the Black 3 Section. Curiously, he carries two weapons, his FAMAS and a Kalashnikov. When questioned, he shows me the shattered scope of his weapon, neutralized by enemy fire at very close range. He ended his mission with the "AK" taken from one of his adversaries, killed in a cave. Kill to win and above all not to be killed. Seeing this lieutenant among his men on his way to his building makes me realize how well our officer training program holds up. Like many of his fellow officers, he graduated "ready-for-use" from Saint-Cyr or the Combined Arms Military Academy (semi-direct recruitment from NCOs) and its training school. He may not have the operational experience of his NCOs and soldiers, but he knows how to command, how to show genuine concern for his subordinates, and how to transform orders from his chain of command into "lower" orders out in the field.

We know that the whole army is behind us

Priority is given to forces engaged in combat. Transport aircraft are mobilized for airlifts, while fighter jets fly long hours to inform, protect, and support us. Operations continue throughout the Northern Zone, in the Adrar and along the border. The units are spread over 125 miles between Boughessa and Aguelhok. A new convoy left at 4 am to pick up Algerian fuel. It returns at nightfall, towing a broken-down armored vehicle. During these raids and distant missions, not a single vehicle will be abandoned in the field for four months. In the South, the Timbuktu squadron continues its raid north of the river. They are approaching Gourma-Rharous while the Malians and our small LU are searching the Niger bend from the south. The goal is to catch the terrorists in their tracks and prevent them from blending in among civilians.

The Ametettai and In Tegant are coming to an end, and it is time for rest and recovery—for both men and equipment—before continuing further south, in liaison with our Chadian allies. It has been almost two weeks since operations began. The squadrons that left with 10 and 12 tanks have thinned out, ending the fighting with four at the bottom of the valleys. Victims of heatstroke and the stomach flu have replaced the wounded in medical tents, the latter having been evacuated by helicopter. I decide to maintain a blockade at the western entrance to Ametettai and In Tegant and to bring the entire CAT 4 back to Tessalit to give them a break. Under normal circumstances, it would have been better to "exploit" this tactical victory, but in agreement with the leaders on the ground, I decide to put the operation on hold to allow units to sleep in a secure area, rehydrate,

and clean their weapons and gear. We managed to get the logisticians to hook up two shower trailers so eight men can wash up in individual cabins simultaneously. I have them placed in the center of the two CAT bivouac areas: one for the paratroopers and one for the armored units. The water tanks were filled to the brim with well water just before the units returned. These trailers are designed for a company of 150 men. They will be used by two CATs comprising more than 700 men each, with priority given to combatants. CP personnel will continue to wash themselves with their two bottles of water.

A soldier's comfort is not a luxury, but simply allows them to endure and therefore to fight. A leader needs to keep constant tabs on their physical and moral strength, and experience the same privations and joys as his followers. This is why the Grumblers and WWI vets followed their leaders to the ends of the Earth and sometimes into the depths of hell. Living with one's men in order to understand them remains the basis of command, the foundation of what one learns in officer training school, as well as in non-commissioned officer training, and of what one naturally experiences in the field and in operations, from corporal to general. The sedan chair is no longer part of this world we fight in. In Tessalit, it soon became clear that we had to make an effort to improve this minimal comfort, to give our soldiers a little creature comfort, the mark of consideration to which everyone is entitled. We set four simple goals for this period of "getting back in shape" or basic personal well-being: 3 liters of well water every other day, one onion, one beer, and one phone call per week. At the same time, Grégoire takes the necessary measures to ensure that equipment is repaired by sending us maintainers and the spare parts available in the theater.

By the evening of the 8th, the first soldiers have returned to camp. The lights illuminate the small buildings to the left of the CP and the field hospital. However, operations continue and In Tegant has not been fully searched.

Saturday, March 9

"Thoughts from the Adrar: from the Cold War to the Cours Mirabeau"

Xavier got up in the middle of the night as usual. He took a walk to the TOC before smoking his cigarette and lying back down on his bunk. We often find ourselves in front of this building, facing the starry sky and the foothills of the Adrar, whispering to avoid waking up those around us. The old colonial paratrooper colonel, who came from the Combined Arms Military Academy, and his young Saint-Cyr general, who came from the mechanized infantry, are on the same front, sharing the same convictions

and the same references, the same fears and the same simple joys with the men of Tessalit.

It's going to be a busy day. A plane is evacuating the prisoners to Bamako, among them the wounded children. In the early morning, a Chadian Hercules lands on the airstrip. The Minister of Defense and his military leaders have come to see their troops. Xavier takes them in a Puma. At the same time, Denis, the Southern Deputy Commander, leaves Gao to inspect the outpost in Menaka, near Niger. Inside the TOC, I look at the map. CAT 3 continues its raid along the northern border while its infantry company, in the Adrar, continues its meticulous advance into In Tegant and the "sand camp." The reality of danger quickly catches up with us by the middle of the morning with two events: an X-10RC tank ran over a mine—albeit an old one—between the two border towns of Boughessa and Tin Zaoutene, more than 120 miles from Tessalit. A few minutes later, a skirmish broke out between the Porpoises and one, then two, then three terrorists in the "sand camp" of In Tegant. The tank lost one of its six wheels. The suspension arm was torn off by the explosion, the wheel along with it. The crew escaped unharmed. The medical helicopter will not take off this time. Further south, the terrorists failed to escape. One of them had booby trapped the corpse of his slain accomplice. Wounded, he allowed the group to approach and opened fire on the body a few yards away after throwing a grenade. The infantrymen's reflexes were quicker.

Meanwhile, CAT 4 is leaving Ametettai for Tessalit. About 40 paratroopers reached their barracks by helicopter. The others were picked up by the same convoy of logistic and tactical vehicles as on the outward journey, two weeks earlier. "*115 °F, the air feels like it's on fire.*" In the afternoon, after having reworked the plans of attack on the next valley, I decide to go and see our Chadian allies again to find out their intentions and to refine the future combined actions on both sides of the Adrar. I intend to take advantage of a supply run for the French contingent scheduled for 3 pm. Their authorities have left for N'Djamena. Our helicopters are at their breaking point. The first Puma breaks down, the second takes off loaded with water, parts, and ammunition. At the same time, despite the unbearable heat, the mechanics dismantle the engine of one of the two Tigers strewn with bullet impacts to repair another attack helicopter. This is what we call "cannibalism," and is the last resort when waiting for parts.

Franco-Chadian consultation between two valleys

In Aguelhok, the Chadian contingent is camped out on flat ground dotted with small trees under which the soldiers are seated. Armored vehicles

are parked, as are a dozen tracked BMP-1 troop transports (Soviet manufacture). I approach one of them. They are heavily armed, streamlined, and low to the ground to avoid anti-tank rockets. During the Cold War, this machine was my enemy. Twenty-five years earlier, as a young officer stationed in Germany, I trained my conscripts in frozen camps how to fire grenades, rockets, missiles, and shells at BMP-shaped targets. On the other side of the Wall, our Warsaw Pact neighbors did the same on silhouettes resembling my own armored vehicles. In the pocket of my fatigues, like all the section chiefs of the 5th Armored Division, I carried a book of enemy equipment. The BMP was on the first page. The organization chart, the regiments, the equipment of the Czech 5th Armored Division, we could recognize "those on the other side." We had to hold out for 48 hours, the time needed to set up the tactical nuclear strikes using the Pluton missiles, warning shots before our strategic forces launched intercontinental missiles. As I walked around this BMP, I thought about how quickly things have changed for the West in the past few decades if not years, where the clash of blocs has been replaced by counterterrorism wars in the distant lands of weakened nation-states. Although our equipment has adapted over the course of our engagements, the fundamentals of operational readiness remain unchanged. I join the Chadian meeting area, leaving thoughts of conscripts and our two opposing 5th Armored Divisions in the back of my mind. I take a notebook out of my pocket and a map of the Adrar. We take stock together of their orders, their capabilities, their needs, and our expectations. You have to be open to understanding and explaining, especially since there is no relationship of subordination between us. However, we have the same desire to put an end to these terrorists. Our resources are limited, and those of the Chadians are even more so. On this scorched earth of the Adrar, they are the only ones fighting with us. They have paid the price of blood and though they fight differently, they are not afraid to go on the attack. During these weeks, French and Chadians will meet together in the overheated valleys of the Adrar, the wounded under the same tents of the field hospitals. On the 9th, their return to the eastern or southern flank of the Tigharghar is not guaranteed. We must therefore take this into account for future orders, even if we know that they can move quickly and join us on a joint operation. The discussions are over. The liaison team informs me that the second rotation of Puma supplies has left Tessalit. I have to return with the empty helicopter.

Well done Bigors, worthy heirs to your Kerrando elders!

I have less than an hour left to see the mortar section detached to support the Chadians. As soon as they returned from the Ametettai, the Bigors left

for Aguelhok. The two women in the section live in the same conditions and would not change places for anything. They confirm that to me. We really do have a great youth. This section contributed to our victory, and I tell them so. I haven't seen them in a week, since that night of March 1st. They didn't know I was in the Puma, too busy retrieving the crates of shells dropped off in the dark after a day of shooting. Aguelhok disappears and I ask the pilot to stop at CAT 3's logistics position between Aguelhok and Tessalit, where the suppliers, mechanics, nurses, and cooks not caught up by the raid are located. In the middle of this stronghold lost in a desert of rocks, the Caesar howitzers are idle, their barrels turned toward the Adrar, ready to fire again. It was they who joined CAT 3 on the morning of February 26th after a rapid crossing of the Anefis Desert, before shots were fired to destroy the terrorist positions. The visit was not planned and so much the better. I meet the dubious eyes of soldiers who try to correct their attire when they see me. They are at rest and may they remain at rest. They earned it! A tank is hanging from a recovery truck, ready to be towed to Tessalit. The sentries watch the outside of the circle. The Bigors are at the foot of their howitzers in sandals and flip-flops. The outfits are not regulatory. The jackets have been replaced by sports jerseys. Some of them are playing volleyball. A moment of hesitation passes through the ranks of the battery as I approach. I do the same when I see their outfits. They hastily gather around me in a semi-circle. We are far from our barracks and I am happy and proud to see them again, to talk to them, and to congratulate them. Like the African artillerymen in Gao, most of them have been in Afghanistan and all of them know the vital importance of support when the vanguard units come under enemy fire. A moment in time among soldiers. This battery is not part of my 3rd Brigade in Clermont-Ferrand, but like the paratroopers from the 11th and the other Porpoises from the 9th, with the hussars [light cavalry] from the intelligence brigade, we are all one, all united in this Serval Brigade. Just as I am leaving, the battery warrant officer, an old NCO, steps out of the ranks and hands me a simple pin, the insignia of his regiment, the only gift available between Tessalit and Aguelhok. I know this insignia, that of the 11th Marine Artillery Regiment, formerly the Colonial Artillery Regiment of the Levant, it was that of my grandfather in the 1930s, at the time when he commanded a battery composed of Bigors of the 11th, legionnaires of the 2nd Foreign Legion Inf Rgt and skirmishers in the sector of Ksar el-Souk, in Kerrando, close to the Tunnel of the Legionnaire on the road to Meknes in the Moroccan South. When he retired, this insignia hung on the wall of his living room, of his colonial museum. I pinned it inside my beret, and it has remained there ever since. This kind of gift from the heart is worth much more than a decoration.

It's going to be dark soon. The Bigors will stretch out on their crates to avoid scorpion bites. Their cots are back in Gao. Some are still in Bamako. We fly over rocky ridges and fields of black rocks and pebbles. The area is deserted, some camels are slowly walking about. It was a busy day: a visit with the Chadians, an armored vehicle neutralized by a mine on the border, a skirmish at the "sand camp," and the return of the paratroopers from CAT 4. After the evening briefing, a few officers from Aix-en-Provence enter my small office with a package under their arm. Denis, my Southern Deputy Commander who is originally from Aix-en-Provence, received sweets, biscuits, and cakes and managed to get them to us in the North. They have melted a little, but we ate every last crumb of them. The "Aixois" are former students of the military middle and high schools in Aix. Not all of us went to Saint-Cyr, but, in these schools, we all have fond memories of shared camaraderie, the names of devoted teachers who trained us and passed on their knowledge, often with passion and affection, the memory of our first uniforms, learning about military life, of life in a community and the austere lines of these buildings from another time. Thank you Denis, we will return the favor on the Cours Mirabeau. Night has fallen, the Foreign Legion Para Rgt leaves the Ametettai. We share a beer, then our rations on the terrace as we watch the first stars appear in the sky above.

Sunday, March 10

"Terz: this is a cut-throat entrance…"

The night was short. I make an inventory of the issues to be dealt with between the two valleys, of the coordination between the four outposts between the Adrar and the Niger bend, and of the resources at my disposal to relieve soldiers and support units in case things get rough. It's hard to sleep when your "hard drive" doesn't want to take a break; Xavier does the same. It is not yet 5 am and we find ourselves outside in the dark once again. I send a few messages to Denis to guide the reflections of the main CP which has to think about coordinating operations on both fronts. The two CPs in Gao and Tessalit are working simultaneously and we will cross-reference our orders, review and correct them based on the latest data. I would like to share them and have them validated by Bamako and Paris by tomorrow, when I return from the weekend. At the end of the morning, with the FCP, we review the hypotheses of attacking the Terz Valley, south of the Ametettai. The situation has changed! This time, we will no longer be able to take the enemy by surprise by attacking from the north with infantrymen. In addition, the 20-mile-long valley is much

steeper, making it easier to trap your adversary and delay combat. Finally, the western entrances south of Tessalit are narrow, and I am not sure if we can make it through with our armored vehicles. As for our Chadian allies, it is not yet certain that they will attack through the eastern entrance. In order to establish a plan of attack, I need to remove some uncertainties and take some preliminary steps: gather more "field intelligence" to know what assets I can commit and identify bypass routes. Faithful to my convictions to engage my infantrymen only if they can be supported by artillery, I ask that all hypotheses be studied, giving priority to mobility, surprise if possible, and destroying the enemy with artillery shells. This requires a careful study of the map, a good knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of our equipment. An artillery shell is very accurate, but it cannot reach the slope on the other side of the hill. We therefore need to supplement it with mortar shells, whose parabolic trajectory can strike almost anywhere, provided that you can see the target. The comparison of trajectories, ranges, reliefs, and observation posts is essential to retain or discard hypotheses.

The funnel-shaped entrance is more favorable for entering the valley, but the logistical constraints linked to the distance between Tessalit and the eastern side quickly make this hypothesis risky in terms of sustainability. We will need to attack from the west, which is more suitable for the centralized use of artillery, and to position a "cork" unit to prevent resistance fighters from fleeing to the east and Kidal. In addition to the requests already listed, I have identified two requirements for the success of this mission: to secure the routes on the eastern edges of the massif and to have our Chadian allies block off the eastern gate of the Adrar once again. The rocky gorge at the western entrance does not inspire me at all. While ordering a discreet night observation of this area by helicopter, I ask CAT 4 to find me an alternative solution, well aware that we cannot repeat the Ametettai trick. At the same time, I confirm with the Chadian generals that I will see them soon and that I am counting on them for a combined action on Terz, as discussed during our last meeting.

The sun is at its zenith. CAT 4 is back. The armored vehicles of CAT 3 approach Tessalit from Boughessa, with a towed tank at the rear of the column. The Porpoises from the 2nd guard the west entrance of In Tegant, without going too far south and Terz, to let the uncertainty hang over the future target. In the camp, the temperature has risen to 115°. The companies, having returned from the Ametettai, line up their spoils in front of the CP: thousands of rounds of ammunition, rockets, shells, mortars, machine guns, kalashnikovs, and two howitzers, all visible signs of victory. The

men are sleeping on their crates. They cleaned their tanks, their weapons, and their scopes. They have shaved and are waiting for orders. A Transall lands, but not just any Transall. We have been looking forward to this one. It contains 2,500 beers on pallets, arriving directly from Bamako. From Tessalit, I call the person in charge of supply to set our priorities. If not fruit and vegetables, we need at least onions and a few beers, and later a telephone relay to reach the families. I have the impression that my concerns at the front are not the same as those of some experts at the rear. My liaison's priority is to set up a single mess hall on the Gao base, mine is to rehydrate my units and find short-term food supplements, the bare minimum for my grumblers.

CAT 3 arrives late in the evening after several days of raids. The artillerymen are still detached to Aguelhok with the Chadians. I take advantage of the relative calm to send them by helicopter some cots and their backpacks they left behind on the base. They will be able to change and sleep. At the same time, a new problem arises: the soles of some infantrymen's boots are starting to peel off. It is still difficult to measure the impact on future operations. The men use their second pair of shoes, but some had to leave their duffle bags in Bamako or Abidjan. Xavier is following the situation closely with the colonels who are making an inventory of needs.

The company of light infantry paratroopers is resting in the roofless hangars. The terrorists tore off the corrugated tin roofing and left with it to better camouflage themselves in the desert. Tarps are stretched across the open sky to provide shade. Outside a building, I meet up with the Red 2 Section, the one that stormed the mineral bunker three times, the one that lost Corporal Charenton. The 30 paratroopers are slowly recovering after a grueling operation and enjoying beer and Coca-Cola, albeit warm. I am reminded again of my soldiers in Bosnia, 20 years earlier. They are "*good soldiers, attentive, endearing. I had to see them and talk to them. They will mourn their friend, but he died in battle, a soldier's death, nothing more to be said, he died a hero. It is what it is. We must live and overcome. Do not suffer*." Darkness will cover the camp. The FCP is waiting for me to finalize the orders for the coming days. My last meeting of the evening is with them. We have received proposals from the main CP for the next Operation Doro 3 in the South. The whole of it is coherent and in line with our capabilities, with a few adjustments. Panther 6 will begin at the end of Doro 3, so we can shift supports, especially air and drone support, if necessary, and not be engaged simultaneously and massively in two zones more than 300 miles apart. CAT 4 has fully regrouped in Tessalit, CAT 3 will return tomorrow. The buildings have come back to life. In the evening,

the men take advantage of the relatively cool air to gather, talk, and play cards. Electricity is scarce and, unlike other expeditionary operations, our young soldiers cannot isolate themselves behind their laptops and video games. The lack of news and the recent hardships strengthen these invisible links between soldiers, between leaders and subordinates. The sun has set on the Timetrine. I have validated the operation plan for the next ten days, with some reservations for Panther 6. Bamako and Paris will review it tomorrow. The two CPs have worked well together and the mutual understanding is exemplary. The French always stand together in adversity, and there is no lack of it here. Sharing one of the beers that just arrived with the young officers of the 11th and 3rd Brigades, with totally different specialties and backgrounds, I can see how far we have come in the last 20 years. The procedures and the tactical reasoning method are known and mastered. Above all, they leave plenty of room for imagination and cunning when devising maneuvers. Thinking again and again about this gorge at the western entrance to the Terz Valley, I ask the helicopters to confirm my first analysis of the terrain and my gut feeling. It's time to go to bed. With Xavier and Rémi, we finish our field rations accompanied by slices of onions cut with our army-issued Tatou, a very practical folding knife. Tomorrow is Monday and the start of the work week in France. A visit by Chief of Staff of the Army Ract Madoux is also planned for this coming week.

Monday, March 11

"From Abruzzo to Ifoghas, the combat engineers in the lead"

A quiet day for the most part. CAT 3 returned after five days of raids on the Algerian border. Discussions with Bamako and Paris continue. I ask them to do everything they can to provide the brigade with air intel (drones and the *Atlantic*). I also insist on getting back the infantry units stuck in Kidal protecting the special forces camp and those in Gao, where the unit withdrawn from Menaka has just arrived. This company of Bisons (unit of the 126th Inf Rgt stationed in Brive) will quickly head the Adrar to reinforce CAT 3 which is short on infantry. Taking advantage of the lull and a little well water, I decide to wash my dirty laundry. Transport aircraft have taken over the logistical convoys. At noon, my driver Marie-Jo arrives, accompanied by two chaplains, a Catholic and a Protestant. In this period of "getting back in shape," they couldn't have arrived at a better time. In the afternoon, I confirm to the FCP the choice of the western gate of Terz, even if the entry route has not been decided. The artillery assets will be kept together, with the exception of the detachment to the

Chadians. The three colonels will now prepare their orders for their captains. A colleague tells me that I am on the front page of *Le Monde* alongside the minister of defense, with a caption that reads: "*Voilà*, we have destroyed the AQIM dungeon." Operation Martin is over. At the same time, the Chadians have decided to leave Aguelhok to bypass the Adrar and reconnoiter the southernmost valley, called the Assamalmal Valley, accompanied by a French liaison officer and our mortars. We call this operation Panther 5. General Déby left with his pickups and BMP quickly, to surprise any terrorists keeping a lookout. He will send his tracked vehicles back later and continued eastward, avoiding the main route, which is most certainly mined.

Everyone senses that capturing the Terz Valley will be deadly. This operation has already been named Panther 6. Take one look at a map to see how easily a determined enemy can block the vanguard units. Aerial photographs show walls of stone running perpendicular to the valley in the narrowest sectors. Here again, we will call on combat engineers to clear mines, but also to "re-establish the road," i.e. make the route viable. Looking at the bottlenecks in the valley, I can't help but think of the fighting in May 1944 in Abruzzo and General Juin's brilliant breakthrough in the Garigliano massif. After taking the village of Castelforte south of Mount Majo, General de Monsabert's 3rd engaged his armored vehicles on mountain trails in poor condition. To save time, the combat engineers went first with their bulldozers to clear obstacles and rubble, followed close behind by the Shermans of the Army of Africa. Since this campaign, the African combat engineers from the 31st Engineer Regiment stationed in Castelsarrasin have adopted the motto "Clear the way." The combat will be combined arms, collective as in Ametettai. It is time to settle on the entry routes. Under the cover of the night, the Gazelles take off. With their thermal cameras, their mission is to identify the western entrances and to continue above the massif to avoid giving away our intentions for Terz. In the evening, Chicken, the head of the FCP secretariat, found some lager and, God knows where, some slabs of ice. Accustomed to operations, this *bon vivant* paratrooper knows that one day he may join his wife's business in the South, but in the meantime, he too serves with a smile and the certainty of living an extraordinary adventure.

Tuesday, March 12

Logistics: like a rubber band stretched to the limit

Operations will resume. In the South, Timbuktu patrols continue their reconnaissance north of the Niger, while the Malians comb the other side

of the river, welcomed as liberators by the locals. In the Greater Gao, Operation Doro 3 has begun. The two CAT 2 "Auvergne" units raided as far as Djebok, pursuing enemy pickups. At 7 pm, one of them was destroyed by the 25 mm chain gun of a vanguard section. In Tessalit, the armored vehicles were summarily repaired by their crews and support mechanics from CAT 3, the logistics battalion, and Bamako. Parts and components are still missing. Half of the X-10RC tanks are out of service due to a lack of brake pads. Nearly 200 infantrymen no longer have shoes. Motor oil is missing. The extreme heat limits the Transalls' carrying capacity and 20 tons of drinkable water are still required per day. The logistic battalion's wheeled convoys are doing their best. The rubber band is stretched to the limit and we are gluing patches on holes to prevent it from snapping. Under the sun, the crews top up reservoirs, dismantle, reassemble, and patch up their machines. In the workshop, the wheels are removed. The mechanics show me the condition of the pads: worn to the bone. With a smirk, an old warrant officer explains to me how he cannibalized old, destroyed Berliet trucks from the Malian army to repair his trucks. They are pulling out hack after hack to get things working again. Our maintainers and those of the logistics battalion are doing an outstanding job. In three days, they will restore the two tank squadrons by cannibalizing and using the few spare parts they have received. No one is fooled, this is emergency maintenance. Safety is not compromised, but oil changes are overdue and maintenance is reduced to the bare essentials for driving, telemetry, and firing. In the camp, Malian guides observe the hive. They also want to fight and they tell me so, their heads covered by their long beige scarves. The doctor is more worried. The bivouac areas are unhealthy, the showers and hygiene rudimentary, and he fears an epidemic.

In the small CP building, during the evening briefing, we examine the progress of the Chadians. The BMPs reached Aguelhok, the wheeled vehicles, pickups, and machine guns continued to Jason, the area of the gardens, then on to the caves, after several miles of sandy roads and oases. In the early afternoon, they were involved in a skirmish and one person was killed on each side. We then see the thermal images of the valley entrance: "*A cut-throat entrance, with scree and puddles of water. The armored vehicles can't make it through. We need to rethink our plan*," bypass by the northern flank. With the intelligence office, Desmeulles continues to search for routes from maps and photos. I am intrigued by these black spots, which indicate water at the entrance of the valley. Water means life and survival, therefore the enemy. Before going to bed, I take another look at the current operations in the South with Denis, his helicopter require-

ments, and the number of terrorists killed in Djebok. The doctor gives me a final report on the health situation in the North. I fear this valley, which is more hemmed in than the Ametettai. The men are motivated to continue, but fatigue and dehydration are omnipresent; this break was essential, despite those who would have liked to see us continue in stride. I consider reinforcing the logistical echelon at the entrance to Terz to avoid losing the wounded, but the specialist convinces me to leave the resources grouped in Tessalit. With my two deputy commanders, who are 300 miles apart, we meet regularly to share our thoughts, doubts, and questions, always with the same concern: leave nothing to chance. Rémi observes silently and takes long notes when necessary. He does not hesitate to ask the right questions when doubts arise or an oversight appears. The final decision lies with the leader, there can be no prevarication or questioning when it comes down to executing orders. But the preparatory phase of conceiving and elaborating operational plans and fragmentary orders, remains a collective endeavor. Tomorrow will be another busy day, and I have confirmed that Panther 6 will start on the 14th, which is what Paris wants. Before lying down, I tell our Chadian allies that I will visit them to coordinate and ask them to block the escape from Terz.

Wednesday, March 13

Young officers and mission devotion

I am up at 4 am. With Xavier, like every morning, we leave the CP and head to the officers' washing up: the small vehicles parked in front of the building! In my fatigues, boots, and my old gray 92nd Inf Rgt/KFOR (Kosovo) sweatshirt, I put my metal canteen and my toiletry kit on an empty vehicle hood. The exterior side-view mirror makes a fine shaving mirror and with a ration of two liters of water per person, the "navy" shower is over before it even began. The scorching sun rises over the Tigharghar. Silence is respected in the building to avoid disturbing the tactical operations center, but around the vehicles a good mood prevails. Everyone has a story to tell and the next an even better one. The communications officers of the airmobile CP are already at work cleaning and de-sanding the satellite antennas and the server containers. The young lieutenant from the 53rd Comm Rgt, just out of Saint-Cyr and her training school, commands her team of specialists with tact and precision. Victory also depends on it. I finish shaving and as I watch this young woman quietly command her team, I can't help but think of my early years. I remember a winter morning, far, far away from Northern Mali and terrorists. I was a tiny pawn of an armored division maneuvering

in the Münsingen camp with my three AMX-10 tracked armored vehicles and my 30 light infantry conscripts. We had just gone through four weeks of maneuvering and firing where the temperature varied between -13° and 32 °F. On the morning of the combat exercise, I woke up my men, huddled in their sleeping bags under a plastic tarp covered with snow. Waking up in the freezing cold, finding the right words, warming up coffee in a canteen cup next to an armored vehicle that smells like diesel, oil, and grease. Here too, cohesion was borne of a collective effort, and the simple pleasure of coffee was savored as a reward, not as a due. The leader and his soldiers shared it, like the cold. The world and our engagements have changed, but the basics remain the same.

I've been in Tessalit for almost three weeks now with CATs 3 and 4 and the HU. Once again, I have a feeling that we'll have to adapt to the circumstances before launching our next move, that we'll have to expect the worst without saying a word about it. The FCP and its chief of staff have done excellent preparation work. Desmeulles has identified a route to avoid the gorge. The idea is to conquer the ridge lines of Tahor on foot and then take the vehicles along the "jihadist trail" seen on the aerial photos between the black rocks. However, before confirming the 14th, I want to eliminate five uncertainties that seem essential to me: the boots of my infantrymen, the state of the vehicles and helicopters, the intel priority, the arrival of the small infantry reinforcement, and the intentions of the Chadians. I know I can count on air support. My fellow general Jean-Jacques Borel, at his CP in Lyon Mont-Verdun, closely monitors that fighter jets are allocated as needed and they will never fail us. Our "guardian angels" from France, refueled several times in flight, or from our African bases, will always effectively support us, in addition to our land-based resources (helicopters and artillery).

Boots without soles, a common sense decision

The technology and the men are on point, but the soles of our boots are peeling off and I have no glue or master shoemaker on site. As soon as we were made aware of this problem, the OCCC placed an order to deliver us a few hundred new boots, but a snowstorm has all but shut down France. The loaded trucks at the Brétigny depot are stuck and struggling to reach the airport. From the outset, to avoid being caught off guard, we took a common sense measure: we rounded up all second pairs of "those behind the lines" and, where possible, we replaced the boots of those who don't need to walk with hiking shoes. In Bamako, as in Gao and Tessalit, we amassed enough boots in two days and sent them to the vanguard units with a few words of encouragement tucked inside each pair. Amandine's

message will make the rounds of the Foreign Legion Para Rgt's mess halls, but the legionnaires never realized that Amandine was the pseudonym of a young NCO nurse from the Tessalit forward surgical team!

On our return to France, we will find out that this story of defective shoes made the headlines, illustrating the problems with outsourcing equipment. In the theater, the sudden urgency of the affair acted as an excellent catalyst for cohesion between the rear and the front. Gougeon gave me regular news of the young Porpoise from the 2nd who was proud to be wearing his general's "sand" shoes.

I await answers for the other four issues. I warn Bamako and Paris, who are pushing me to resume operations. The FCP gives itself the morning to coordinate with Gao and check that Doro 3 will be completed in time to have all the necessary means. It's getting hotter. The workshops are full of vehicles. The men take advantage of the two shower trailers. The padre, a Catholic chaplain, celebrates his morning mass. He came up for three days. I had dinner with him the night before. He is very humble and exceptionally kind. A gendarmerie chaplain in the North, Father Danel is accustomed to hearing the confessions of other public servants who live alongside daily misery. From his last tour in Afghanistan, he brought back a white alb offered by the nuns of Kabul. "*They embroidered the Sacred Heart, the one worn by Charles de Foucault, and we are only 200 miles from Tamanrasset. It all makes sense and we know it, as our men are about to be re-engaged in combat.*" On the terrace of a nearby building, the padre sets up a folding table. In front of him, about 50 men of all ranks and origins are attending mass.

General Déby's machine guns bypass the Adrar from the south

A pilot warns me that the supply helicopter is about to leave for the Chadian position in the Assamalmal Valley south of the Adrar. He has to bring water and rations to the French LU. As agreed, I take the opportunity to make a round trip and meet our allies. We follow the massif at low altitude to surprise lookouts and avoid enemy fire. This area is hostile and the Chadian column, which must bypass the Adrar by the south, took care to avoid the small villages at the foot of this black and imposing cliff which stretches from west to east for several dozen miles. We land near a crossroads. I quickly spot Déby. He is in a hurry to leave before it gets too hot. We coordinate for the rest of the operations. He is surrounded by his colonels, against a backdrop of camouflaged Panhard machine guns. A scorpion sign adorns the flanks of their armored vehicles, a distinctive sign of the National Guard, the elite of the Chadian army. Before leaving,

I check in again with the LU and my officer from the 68th who is coordinating fire. The little section of Bigors is holding up well, despite the heat. They appreciated the arrival of their packs and cots. They have enough water to continue and morale is excellent. The Puma lands again, and we embark with two wounded Chadians, shot in the legs, one of whom was lying on a stretcher. To his left is a black bag containing his colleague who was killed the day before. The smell is overwhelming, and we return in tactical flight, low to the ground. The pilot of this air force helicopter is a commander I know well. A few years earlier, he was a lieutenant in my light infantry battalion in Germany. As a former NCO, his only dream was to fly. Having understood this, I supported his request to change service branches so he could pursue his dream.

At the CP, all hands are on deck, everyone is nervous about Terz which is normal. In the helicopter, I wrote on a piece of paper my priorities for the day: monitor Doro 3, confirm or postpone Panther 6, send my opinion on the hypotheses of disengagement, and call the army's department of human resources for the future transfers of my subordinates. We are together in the depths of Mali, but their future is decided in Tours. I want to be sure that their transfer requests are taken into account and that the 3rd Brigade will be fully staffed by summer. The army won't give me any problems for these transfers, and my executive officer who remained in Auvergne will see that everything gets done. At the same time, I am finalizing my position on hypotheses for withdrawing units, not to mention helicopters. We started at the end of January with one CAT and quickly increased to four and then decreased to three, two in the North and one in the South. This operation is expensive and there is a lot of pressure to reduce troop numbers as soon as possible. I understand this requirement, but I need to finish the job. With Xavier and Denis, we decide to give priority to orders based on the capability approach. Most of them will be fulfilled in the coming weeks. We understand that we cannot waste time, but at the same time being too hasty will cost lives. Outside, the temperature is approaching 115 °F, slightly less in our small concrete buildings. The staff gives me their conclusions and answers to my questions: the 200 pairs of used shoes will be delivered, but not before this evening and tomorrow morning. The infantrymen from the 126th recovered their repaired vehicles in Gao. They are in the Anefis Desert on their way to Tessalit but will not arrive until the 15th. It will take another 24 hours to repair two Tiger helicopters and four tanks. On top of it all, we don't have any aerial intel. Finally, I have no guarantees that the Chadians will be in the east tomorrow, nor that Doro 3 will be finished in Djebok. For me, the decision is self-evident: it

is dangerous and unproductive to attack under these conditions. At best, we risk seeing them flee to the east or south; at worst, if they resist, we will not have the balance of power that I believe is sufficient to win. After consulting with my two deputy commanders in Tessalit and Gao, I decide to postpone the operation for 24 hours.

Doro 3. Violent fighting in Djebok

In France, the snowstorm is keeping the media busy. Most of the brigade is in Gao. Fighters and drones provide intel and air support to CAT 2 which has engaged in battle with the MUJWA. Since morning, the AIFV sections have been "staked out" by pickups and motorcycles. Locals repeatedly tell us about mines and explosive devices intended for armored vehicles. Combat engineers from the 31st stationed in Castelsarrasin are clearing the mines "under the noses" of AIFVs. On several occasions, from 11 am until 2 pm, the Gauls were ambushed and could once again hear bullets and anti-tank rockets whistling overhead. Reflexes kick in. The AIFVs destroyed several enemy vehicles with a 25 mm chain gun, prisoners were captured, weapons and documents were recovered. In the air, Lieutenant-Colonel Verborg sees a group of terrorists laying mines on the infantry's route. The coordinates are transmitted to our artillerymen by CAT 2's CP, which has received authorization to fire. The Africans rotate their Caesar howitzers into position and send a barrage of 155 mm shells which fall precisely on the position and immediately destroy everything. Combined arms cooperation, the key to tactical success! Flying over a suspicious zone with his Puma "Pirate," equipped with a 20 mm gun mounted inside the door, the pilot notices a reflection behind a bush, an indicator of a camouflaged vehicle. The position is ideal for an ambush, and the infantry column is approaching. The enemy knows they have been spotted and try to shoot down the Puma, which dodges the shots by going full throttle and turning sharply. From a distance, the area is strafed with machine-gun fire. The 20 mm highly explosive shells leave little chance for the terrorists who retreat, leaving their dead and destroyed vehicles behind. By late afternoon, the survivors have fled the area. CAT 2 has no losses, nor do the Malian units who were engaged with us. The new equipment—AIFVs and Caesars, digitally connected and combined with helicopters—can crush a determined enemy. Listening to Denis as he phones in his report at the end of the evening, I appreciate how useful it will be to have our long-awaited new equipment. Our artillerymen's success comes at just the right time to nip the criticism from those who question the need for this capability in the Southern Zone. A few weeks later, I will have the opportunity to meet my artillerymen in the field.

Night falls on the CP. As is often the case, I meet with our journalist friends, who have come to the end of the world to bear witness to life in the Adrar. As soon as I can, I send them to the first echelon to see the units in action. The conditions are tough and you have to get used to the heat. In the evening, when they are in Tessalit, we share our impressions and a beer depending on when they arrive. Otherwise, we invite them to dinner with a field ration and question them for news from France. On our side, we give them indications about our future activities, our difficulties, and our satisfactions, obviously without dwelling on the details, which everyone understands. Tonight we have journalists from two national TV stations and a major newspaper. The atmosphere is relaxed despite the upcoming engagement in Terz. At nightfall, the logisticians give me a final update: the shoes have arrived from Bamako ("*very nice operation for theater cohesion*"), the vehicle repairs are almost done, and it will be a busy night in the workshops.

The father and the pastor spent the day talking with the soldiers, believers and non-believers alike. They listened and shared stories. Their smiles are weary. "*They warn me that seeing child soldiers killed will be traumatizing.*" They too will carry this burden, having absorbed the malaise of men like sponges. It is time to enjoy a warm beer that Chicken offers them. It is late. Tomorrow we'll finish preparations, collect the shoes, and finalize the FRAGOs.

Thursday, March 14

Final preparations before Terz

The night was short. Xavier and I are going around in circles. The French philosopher Montaigne, during his epicurean phase, would be woken up several times a night to have the pleasure of going back to sleep. The pleasure is non-stop for us, and we don't even need servants to wake us up! I walk around the CP. The field hospital is silent. The doctors have evacuated the wounded to Gao and Bamako before the new operation. The Tiger helicopters are taking a break next to the small Gazelles. At night, the helicopters' curved blades make them look like they are sleeping.

The sun has not yet emerged from the Tigharghar. It must be between two ridge lines. The Puma crews are next to their helicopters, ready to take off at a moment's notice. It's 6 am. Rémi and I make our way to the landing zone, between the field hospital and the wall. The lieutenant salutes us and introduces us to his smiling copilot and warrant officer mechanic. The six journalists accepted my invitation. They follow us with their helmets, sky-blue bulletproof vests, and cameras. We will go to the

Assamalmal Valley and the Chadian encampment. I have a meeting with General Déby and our artillerymen. We need to close Terz's eastern door, neither too soon nor too late. After almost an hour of tactical low-level flying, we reach the allied camp. The general and his colonels are waiting for me, looking serious and proud. Heads wrapped in scarves, the Chadian officers are gathered in a circle. The two generals are sitting face to face in front of a map on a low table. It took a long time to get around the massif and the vehicles suffered. As with the Ametettai, our allies want to be fully equipped to resume the offensive. However, they do not have a logistical echelon to support an expeditionary force over such distances. Time is running out, but they are short on tires and spare parts that need to be flown in from N'Djamena. I ask General Déby for an interview and some pictures on a rock near a group of soldiers.

At the end of the world, they chose a rooster as a mascot

In the meantime, I make my way into a small thalweg where my Bigors and their 120 mm mortars are located. They parked their APCs next to Chadian armored vehicles, marked with the scorpion. My soldiers received their packs and cots. They are better dressed, and we have brought them the supplies they were waiting for. An NCO shows me their mascot, a small rooster standing in the shadow of the mortar, tied up by a string. It has been with them since Aguelhok. Everyone is happy and proud of the animal in the middle of this stone desert. A not-so-distant cousin of Sergeant Stubby*, the rooster is an apt reflection of this troop. He is hot, but he is proud and does not suffer. It is the symbol of a campaigning army, of these soldiers who gather around a symbol, a certain idea of France that is united in arms. The Chadians are also looking for some shade. They are happy to have their picture taken by the journalists. The conditions of the return flight are the same as the outbound flight: fast and low. You have to look out to the horizon to avoid getting sick.

The day is spent repeating orders and checking logistics. A sandpit about 10 x 10 yards was dug in front of the CP, and the Terz Valley was faithfully reproduced inside it by the G08 FCP, in order to review and rehearse the different phases of Panther 6. The chief of operations, regimental commanders, experts, advisors, air officers, and artillerymen, all are gathered to walk through the chronology of actions to be carried out, to review exceptional circumstances, and to describe courses of action based on the outcome. This afternoon meeting gives everyone the chance to see how their action fits into the bigger brigade puzzle: the paratroopers capture the high ground on foot while armored vehicles simulate their entry into the cut-throat passage further south; the role of support (surveillance

drones, fighters, helicopters, and artillery); the bypassing of the jihadist trail and reconnaissance; and successive searches through the valley by different echelons (armored, Porpoises, and infantrymen) all the way to the Chadian positions, 20 miles further east. We spend a better part of the afternoon rehearsing everyone's role with makeshift models.

The course of the upcoming operations is well under control by the three regimental commanders of CAT 3, CAT 4, and the HU. The idea is to advance southward and, at the same time, to position two battalions facing Terz: the armored units to the west of the narrow passage, to immobilize those who try to resist, and the paratroopers a little further north, to "climb" the Tahor pass. Once the jihadist trail and the high ground have been taken, CAT 3 will leave its position and take over from CAT 4 to carry out reconnaissance of this steep, compartmentalized, and overheated valley. The artillerymen will be placed under the orders of CAT 3 at the entrance and opening of the valley to ensure the best firing angles, air patrols will provide air support and the air controller will be detached to the CAT 3 CP. The next day will be spent moving up and down the Trans-Saharan, without specifying which direction. Before sunrise on the second day, the units will turn to the left to take Terz. The delay will allow us to ensure the valley is closed off by the Chadians, to finish the delivery of the last shoes by helicopters if necessary, and to resupply artillery with ammunition. The HU, as well as the planes, will monitor the southern flank of the valley, ready to provide air support like they did in the Ametettai if the enemy attempts to flee. The solution is not ideal because an air interception system, however sophisticated and precise, cannot be maintained indefinitely. The distances are such that we will stick to principles as much as possible and concentrate efforts on crucial areas where we suspect the enemy to be. We insist on prioritizing sensors, which was not always possible during previous operations.

It's the troops' last evening before returning to the Adrar. The men are lined up in front of the two shower blocks. The communicators extended a large telephone wire behind the satellite vehicle. A dozen phones—on the ground in the dust—are connected to it. Each man is allowed five minutes to call the number of his choice in France, time to reassure family and friends and to get some news from home. Twenty years earlier, in the Bihac Pocket, the conditions were very similar. Mail was slow (ten days) and satellite facilities were scarce and expensive. Internet as we know it today did not yet exist.

In front of the CP building, the tiny outline of Terz seems to defy the foothills of the Tigharghar, still illuminated by the blazing sun. The small

white pebbles that lead up to the Tahor pass are reminiscent of the Belvedere climb, taken by the 4th Tunisian Skirmishers, 70 years ago.

Water, boots, and morale

I check in with my logisticians again. Our water supplies are running low. We only have two days reserve left, or 40 tons. The units are strong and the last few weeks have only made them tougher. The tactics used saved lives and severely hindered the enemy. The wounded were evacuated in time. New equipment has made a difference: the mobility, precision, and firepower of Caesar howitzers and Tigers in the North, along with that of AIFVs in the wadis of the Greater Gao, and the images and tactical reconnaissance from small intel teams to complement the heavier air assets. All this reassures our men, but, like their leaders, they are quite incapable of knowing what this fleeting, determined, and well-trained enemy is really up to, especially as the terrain will work more to their advantage this time around. The brigade is once again in the fog of war. We have the initiative on our side, but the goddess Fortuna is capricious and unpredictable. Every day, the scorecard changes. All it takes is for us to let our guard down and the enemy can score a point. So we remain humble and obsessively cautious during our preparations. Before going around the camp, I get in touch with Grégoire. Doro 3 is now complete and the Northern Zone will have priority for intelligence resources. The theater's logistical efforts have paid off. In a short period of time, the vehicles have been repaired and supplies are being replenished. It is time to send the daily evening report and the general's assessment of the situation.

Between the two valleys, I urge Bamako and Paris to authorize a stopover in Paphos, Cyprus, so the troops can decompress. The idea is to offer the troops returning from a difficult theater the chance to stay in a hotel for three days, as they transition from the field of battle back to their base or family in France. This practice was put in place for soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and had the immense advantage of giving soldiers time to recover after the intense fighting in Kapisa-Surobi and before returning to be with their families. It is a period of readjustment to normal life, sleep, and living among civilians. On their return from Indochina, units spent several weeks on the ocean liner *Pasteur*. They had time to prepare for their return, to decompress, and to get back to civilian and family life. After several months of rustic life, our soldiers also see this decompression as a sign of gratitude by the nation. It is organized by military teams from the deployed regiments, reinforced by psychologists and doctors, and is an opportunity to detect "invisible wounds," suffering and the first symptoms of psychological disorders linked to combat or trauma. I insisted on

offering the brigade this decompression period because I was convinced that all these men and women needed and deserved it. Like my two deputy commanders, Xavier and Denis, I know that it takes time for some people to forget certain things or get an image out of their head. The chaplains and doctors have alerted me, and it is my duty to accompany these fighters as long as needed. Twenty years earlier, I commanded a company of Gauls from the 92nd Inf Rgt, and we had returned without any transition, after six months of an intense and trying engagement in the Bihac Pocket. We had left our lodgings in Cazin at night, crossed the devastated Krajina in trucks, and arrived at Orly Paris as the luxury shops were opening in the early morning. The infantrymen walked through the duty-free area with its smell of perfume and charming hostesses after being on tour for six months. The shock was violent. Twenty years later, I can still see the faces of my men, stunned by this abrupt transition to luxury and carefree living after a two-hour flight from hate and ruin. While waiting for the buses to Clermont-Ferrand, the groups had regathered in silence. Men had hugged each other like bears, aware that they were spending their last hours together, after several months of sharing everything. With this experience in mind, the Paphos stopover seemed to me an indispensable necessity. All the veterans of Afghanistan have experienced this stopover as a much-needed time of transition to get back to normal after several trying months.

The small Korean hands me a portion of rice, the Algerian, a piece of goat

The sun has dipped into the sands of the Timetrine. In the dark, I walk around the bivouac areas before the evening briefing at the CP and the phone call with Denis in Gao. Legionnaires are gathered around a fire. They heat up rice and dish it out in makeshift bowls: half a bottle of water cut lengthwise. A corporal of Algerian origin bought a goat, which quickly ended up on a roasting spit. It is small but meat is scarce, making this a welcome change from the field rations. A moment of friendly banter and storytelling. The corporal lived on the other side of the border before enlisting. He knows the going prices well, which he explains to me amidst the laughter of his friends with their strong Slavic or Chinese accents. A short Korean legionnaire gives me a portion of rice; he is happy to see his general. Morale is excellent. The legionnaires are in their element. Respect for the leader, humility, cohesion, and this impression of quiet strength, discipline, and professionalism do not prevent simple relationships from forming between the legionnaires and their leaders. The commanders are with their men and they form a solid, united whole. A little further on,

the Porpoises from the 1st finish checking their armored vehicles. Since their arrival in Tessalit, the Crocos have been integrated with the CAT 4 paratroopers. They too are enjoying the relative warmth of the evening. On the other side of the camp, Gougeon spends his last evening with his Porpoises, Bigors, combat engineers, and infantrymen.

Like every evening, the FCP takes stock of the day. This is the time to provide information, priorities, and guidelines and to discuss them. This is also the time to set the tone, to congratulate, and to warn about weaknesses in the system. Every time the general enters or leaves this small meeting room at the end of the corridor, everyone stands at attention, even though we live side-by-side every day. This formalism does not detract from the simplicity of the relationships, but it is part of our code, the way we do things. The non-compliant cases, or "complications," have been reviewed and answers provided, although they are not exclusive. I made sure that the means were anticipated to facilitate the journalists' reporting. I made it clear that I was keeping the paratrooper commando unit on standby in case an opportunity arose to rescue hostages in the area.

CAT 2 is fully assembled in Gao. At Bamako's instigation, a Burkinabé battalion is arriving in Timbuktu to relieve the squadron at the airport. The brigade CP is already evaluating future missions that this unit will be able to carry out, once our African allies are in place. Less than two months after the city was liberated, a strong AFISMA contingent has arrived, as in Menaka, allowing French units to withdraw. Grégoire is in charge and coordination with the Malians and the Africans is effective and quick.

Friday, March 15

Panther 6, D-Day

Wrapping up in the Adrar and preparing to withdraw forces

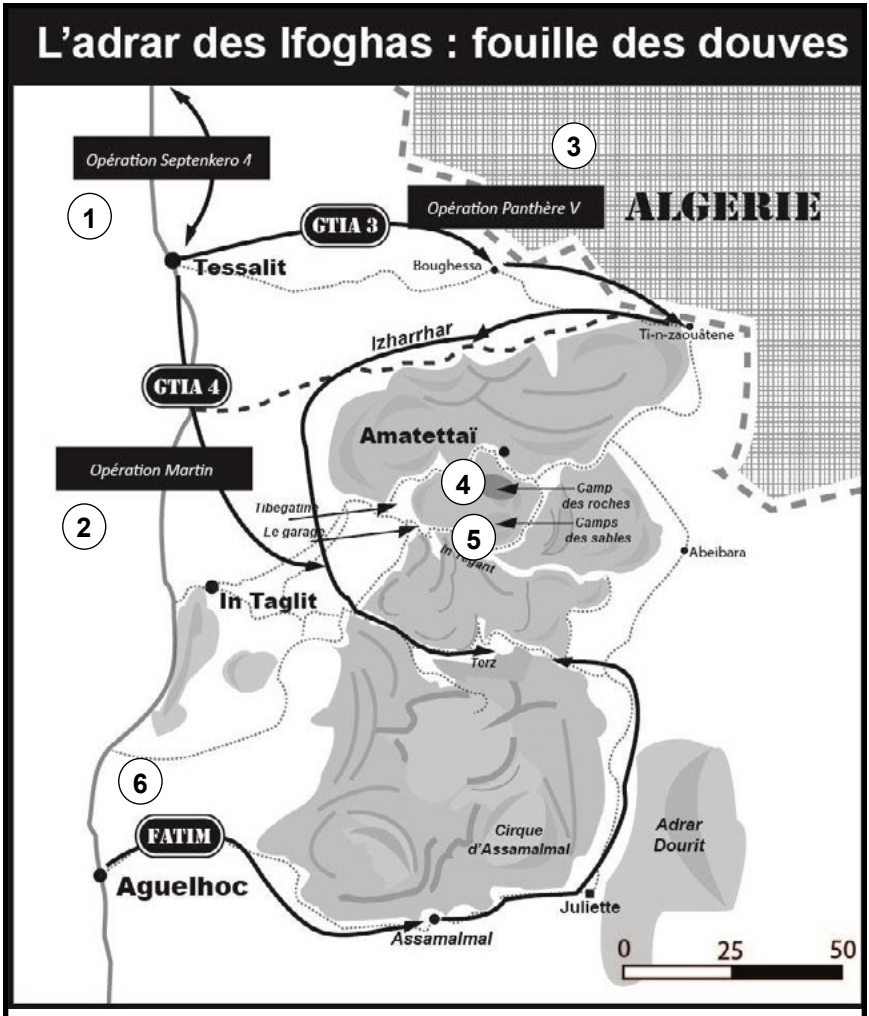
Here we go again. The Tessalit camp is a beehive of activity and units are on war footing. Armored vehicles line up in the column by squadron. APCs, logistics trucks, and fuel tankers are lined up in front of the CAT 4 CP, ready to go. The helicopters—checked countless times by the mechanics—are in the center. A breakdown can be fatal over such distances. It's 5 am. The heat is still bearable. Legionnaires can be seen to the right of the brigade CP, busy about their barracks. Some are still wearing their headlamps. The departure of the squadrons and companies of the two CATs heading south will take up most of the morning. The colonels are at work.

I go back to my little office after seeing all the hustle and bustle. My concerns are elsewhere: balancing the brigade in space and time. While the short term is under control, the same cannot be said for the weeks to come. Panther 6 is off to a good start, Doro 3 is finished, but the strain on our soldiers is taking its toll. Denis confirms that Bamako is working on plans to withdraw forces. The goal is to reduce the brigade's troop numbers from 3,200 to 2,200 by the end of April, leaving mostly light units in the field. I fully understand the financial logic behind these plans, but on the eve of attacking a second valley, and without knowing the enemy's level of attrition, it is difficult for me to subscribe to this logic and, above all, to withdraw support units (artillery and engineers) or well-protected AIFV units first. We are still engaged in coercive operations that require the full range of air-land capabilities. At this stage of the campaign, in the Adrar and Gao, we must pursue terrorist katibas and drive them from their safe havens. Later, our replacements will be able to hunt down small groups with ad hoc, targeted operations.

The heat has taken over Tessalit, blinded by a dazzling sun. I hang up the phone. Denis is going to put together our position, our capability brief on the disengagement maneuver. The roadmap is tense, time is running out, and everyone knows that these katibas must be taken out.

The vehicles are full of boxes of water and ammunition. Having just finished their repairs, the last armored vehicles join the squadrons. I spend the morning with Xavier to see my Africans again from the 126th, from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt, the combat engineers from the 31st who proudly offer me their patch depicting divers specialized in clearing mines. The Ametettai behind them, they are now leaving for Terz. I meet up, unannounced, with the section of Warrant Officer Morgan, attached to the Roosters. I talk for a few moments with my tank crews from Angoulême. With their 105 mm barrels, they will protect the infantrymen of the Foreign Legion Para Rgt. The legionnaires join their vehicles, column by column, crossing the large open area of the camp. The men's uniforms are impeccable, helmets on their heads and cartridge belts strapped on tight. Missile shooters and loaders carry their heavy cylinders on their backs, machine gunners a case of ammunition under each arm. Weight: the infantryman's mortal enemy. Everyone knows where they need to be. The sergeants located their vehicles the night before with the lieutenants.

When I see them, I cannot help but think of my mechanized light infantry almost 30 years ago in Germany: the same shapes, the same gestures, the same division of responsibilities. Lieutenant Jean-Thomas of the Foreign Legion Para Rgt salutes me, followed by his legionnaires from



1. Operation Septenkero 4.
2. Operation Martin.
3. Operation Panther 6.
4. Camp of the Rocks.
5. Camp of the Sands.
6. FATIM Chadian Armed Forces intervening in Mali.

Figure 12. Adrar of the Ifoghas—Search of the Moats. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

all over the world. He commands and lives with his men, who trust him. This alchemy of the military profession is the essence of our identity and our vocation. For the most part, these men were not born when, as a young lieutenant, followed by my 30 conscripts, equipped and helmeted, I joined my tanks on the French square at the Münsingen camp, at the Mourmelon tank depot. In the morning, before the cold German sunrise, the wind

whirling across the tank depot and firing ranges made the -4 °F feel even colder. And yet, these men followed their leader, like the legionnaires, the Gauls, the Bisons, and the Porpoises follow theirs. The infantry remains the infantry. The Soviet tanks have disappeared, and now we are hunting down terrorists. It is the same army, the same ideals, the same training, an army that has adapted significantly over time through successive reforms, but which has kept its soul, its rules, and its code of honor, an army dedicated to defending France and its values.

CAT 3 leaves Tessalit, followed by CAT 4, with the armored vehicles in the lead and the trucks behind. In the evening, they will meet up with the infantrymen and artillerymen of In Tegant, at the entrance of the Ametettai. A corporal brings me a bottle of water, essential to avoiding heatstroke. Xavier and I watch them all leave and we salute them, without words, one after the other for two hours. Not all of them will make it back. The column moves south slowly, already covered with sand and dust. We spend the afternoon studying the disengagement plans. I hold a press briefing for the journalists to explain the situation and ongoing operations. My intention, as they know, is to allow them to see all the components on the ground, without compromising their own security. They too are under pressure from Paris. They have to produce stories and show the French people back home what their soldiers are going through in Mali. We must allow them to bear witness, to put in their own words what they understand and what they see of this campaign. They are the architects and guarantors of freedom, even if at times we do not like or agree with what they report on. We have more helicopters available, making it possible to airlift them by Puma to the arrival positions of the two CATs. In agreement with them, I have divided the two television news teams, careful not to put either one at a disadvantage.

The sun sets once again on a camp emptied of its inhabitants. The column has reached the western edges of the Tigharghar. Our liaison officer with the Chadians tells us of our allies' impatience as they await supplies from us. Located in the Assamalmal Valley, they are ready to go to the eastern exit of Terz. The expected tires have still not arrived, but parts have reached their rear base in Aguelhok and only our helicopters can make these movements. Orders are given to that effect. Our brothers in arms are paying the price of blood, and we are all in the same boat!

Vigil of arms for the CP. In Gao, Denis and Bert take stock of Doro 3, an overall successful operation. The enemy suffered casualties, crushed at every encounter by the combination of fire from AIFVs, Caesar howitzers, and helicopters. The chief of staff is preparing for future operations with

the same determination not to suffer attacks but to hunt down the terrorists. In Tessalit, we watch the news reports on the two main national TV channels. The first report is objective while the second on our Chadian allies is more controversial, the one filmed two days earlier in the southern part of the massif. What a shame!

Saturday, March 16

Panther 6, Day 2

Artillery and fighter jets destroy terrorist depots

It's hard to sleep. Xavier and I are up at 1 am. Once again, the die has been cast. From In Tegant, the paratroopers have reached the northern foothills of Tahor to seize the heights and avoid going through the narrow passage. CAT 3 has reached the entrance of the gorge to draw out the resistance. Everything is falling into place. Under the cover of darkness, Desmeulles pushes his companies of legionnaires toward the heights while Gougeon deploys his forces out in the open. I am cautious about support; artillery and helicopters are on alert and fighters are providing cover. If the infantry and armored vehicles get trapped by the enemy, their salvation will come from support, but the wait will be long. My air officer, Rodolphe, and his artillery liason officer counterpart, are two inseparable twins. They work side by side in the small TOC room, in the immediate vicinity of Lieutenant Colonel Bruno, the chief of operations. At 5 am, once the operation is underway, I fly by helicopter to the CAT 3 CP a few miles from the entrance to the valley. I want to check the "fire chain," this complex and continuous system that starts with the forward observer, engaged on the front line, all the way to the barrels at the rear, through the advisor captains who propose potential enemy targets to the CAT colonel and the intended effects. In theory, this may seem simple. In reality, preparation and coordination between different elements of this chain are key to success. A tiny mistake is all it takes for a guided bomb to fall on our lines. The batteries are in place and the firing range has been calculated to cover the entire valley for more than 12 miles. On the other side, the mortar detachment to the Chadians will supplement fire if needed. At the CAT 3 CP, I connect with the team from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt which I have been working for a year and a half. The aviator and the gunner are present. Targets have been detected by a Harfang drone: camouflaged pickups, probably hiding ammunition dumps. A fighter patrol is ordered to destroy them. We watch the scene unfold on a small screen, the *Rover,* which receives images from the drone. The vehicles are pulverized in a deluge of flames. We can hear the explosions from the CP. However, we do

not detect any combatants on foot. The legionnaires arrive on the heights without a fight. The tension is palpable. We fear an overlap of our forces and short-range fire in this desert of black stones. The aerial patrol is out of fuel and leaves the area. Informed by the drone, the artillery continues firing into the valley, destroying in turn two other vehicles as the journalists watch with keen interest. The two assets are complementary. Laser-guided bombs are particularly effective on very precise targets (bunkers or pick-ups), but setting up the shot generally requires a few exchanges between the sensor and the aircraft, which can take time and give mobile targets the chance to escape. For ground units, these particularly effective bombs are therefore a complement to their own weapons. The artillery batteries are trained to fire in a matter of minutes on deployed targets, fixed or mobile, up to 6 miles for the mortars, 25 miles for the Caesars. The precision of the 155 mm shells to within 10 yards, day or night, offers firing possibilities far superior to previous artillery pieces. The combination of this fire power, associated with that of tanks and helicopters, requires anticipation, technical knowledge, and clear orders to prioritize shots depending on the nature of the enemy and what is within range and available.

How to tell a terrorist from a shepherd

It's 11 am, the cogs of the wheel are turning. On the tactical intelligence side, the listening teams are in place. I divided my specialized unit into two detachments, one in Tessalit and one in Gao. The day before, terrorist chatter was overheard in the valley. The information was disseminated. Malian guides observe, fascinated by this deployment of capacities, antennas, and computers. They hear the artillery fire echoing through the valley. One of them speaks our language well. He organized "adventure" trips to the Tigharghar for French tourists. He speaks of it as a happy, bygone era. He is Tuareg and only aspires to live in peace in his own region. His family, who left two years ago, lives a few miles from the CP. His wife is waiting for him, as a refugee in a neighboring country. Countries at peace do not realize how lucky they are.

I ask him how to tell the difference between a native and a terrorist in the area. His commonsense answer is disconcerting. A native will look a stranger in the eyes and his feet are damaged, whereas a terrorist's feet are fine as they flee the area on a motorcycle or on the back of a camel. Back at the CP in Tessalit, progress reports come in one after the other. The Chadians have reached the eastern entrance to the valley in rapid raid style. The Pumas brought them the supplies they needed between Aguelhok and Terz. The Gazelles cautiously fly over Tahor. From above, they guide the paratroopers by pointing out the "jihadist trail" needed for vehicles to in-

filtrate the valley. Terz quickly reveals its first secrets: shell dumps, food reserves hidden in the rocks, and unoccupied firing positions. The CAT 4 squadron—the Crocos—follows the infantry companies closely, ready to shoot as far as possible in these large spaces dotted with rocks and stone bunkers. The heat is stifling. A Puma has just evacuated a soldier suffering from heatstroke.

Corporal Van Dooren killed serving France

At 4 pm, the chief of the tactical operations center knocks on the door of my small office, which is unusual. The lead tank has just run over an explosive device, camouflaged in a bend under a layer of sand. The artillery shell was fired by a pressure plate, crushed under the wheels of the AMX-10RC. The weight of infantrymen is not enough to trigger it. We will find out later that another shell, even bigger, did not explode. Within minutes, the tank burst into flames. The tank commander sergeant, assisted by an engineer sergeant, jumped into the turret to rescue his two men who were knocked out by the shock and wounded by the explosion. He saves them just in time, suffering serious burns in the process. In the front, the driver is unresponsive. The 15 pounds of explosives pierced the floor of his compartment. Corporal Alexandre Van Dooren from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt stationed in Angoulême will be the fourth person from the brigade killed in action. The surgeons are notified immediately and a medical helicopter takes off, raising a cloud of dust as it rushes south to evacuate the three burn victims. An hour later, the nurses from the forward surgical team take the three Porpoises out of the Puma. "*A difficult moment when war and suffering show us their ugly face.*" A specialist in severe burns from Percy Hospital, the Army Training Hospital in Clamart, receives them, surrounded by anesthesiologist and surgeons from other military hospitals. The enemy has "spoiled" the terrain, to use military jargon, by laying booby traps and mines. Many were detected and defused by our invaluable combat engineers. It only took one to surprise and destroy this tank. The film cannot be rewound. The corporal died in combat and the right steps must be taken to bolster the morale of the unit that was hit while avoiding being hit again. During the evening briefing, we observe a minute's silence in memory of the young driver. The day before, Xavier and I had greeted him only a few paces from here. In France, his pregnant spouse and little daughter have just been informed. Alexandre was an exemplary corporal, willing and conscientious, one of those who bring honor to their country, one of those whose absence hurts. The senior medical officer arranges the strategic evacuation of the wounded crew. Severely burned, the sergeant is conscious and asks for news of his fellow soldiers. In the entrance to the operating room, I find him lying down. I congratulate

him on his act of bravery, but I also tell him the sad news. He has gone above and beyond the call of duty, but he can't move and his body tenses up as he realizes he won't see his driver again. A tank crew forms a whole, a close-knit team, a small family that shares the good times and the bad, the trials and tribulations of our work. Crew spirit is an almost physical reality. I will meet this courageous non-commissioned officer again on the eve of July 14th when he is decorated by the Minister of Defense. The day before, I will also visit his gunner—still be at Percy Hospital because of his severely damaged skin—to decorate him with the Cross for Military Valor, France's highest distinction.

Sunday, March 17

Descent into the valley, into a mined area

The night in Tessalit was short. It's hard to sleep and not think about this steep and burning valley that has already cost us the life of a young corporal. As soon as I get up, I swallow a canteen cup of coffee and some dry biscuits from the field ration with Xavier, facing the sun as it rises over the Adrar. It's 6 am, the six rear-view mirrors of the three small vehicles are all occupied. The CP officers are shaving in silence. I take advantage of the relative calm to make a round trip to Tahor, to see the scene of the explosion, and meet my men. By Puma, we're there in half an hour. We fly over "*a lunar landscape, black stones everywhere, hillock after hillock and trails between the boulders*." The colonel of CAT 4 meets me on a mountain pass. The Puma leaves immediately. The CP is in the middle of camp, facing a large glacis leaning against a hill. The views extend for more than a mile, on one side the northern foothills through which they approached the massif yesterday morning, on the other the plateau that descends into the Terz Valley, less than a mile away. The companies have taken up positions facing south. They watched all night to detect any human presence, before descending into this dark rift. A column of legionnaires passes nearby to stake out another observation position. The heat has overcome the Adrar, and I meet a journalist and his cameraman embedded in the column. With helmets and bulletproof vests, everything seems harder and yet it is forbidden to go without protection. We get a situation update in front of the field with the officers of the paratrooper CP. I can imagine the dangerous defile right behind the hill. We're going to take it from behind enemy lines.

Looking with binoculars, I can see smoke from the tank that is still on fire a mile back. A few minutes later, I meet Captain Augustin and Gougeon, who joined us in the valley for the occasion, by helicopter from his

CP. A solemn moment for soldiers, where every word counts. This squadron has been everywhere since Niamey and Gao. These Porpoises from the 1st have just lost one of their own and will have to carry on, creeping deeper between the rocks in their overheated tanks and continuing the fight. This time, they have seen the cruel face of death. The column waits for the order to leave and all will pass in front of the still smoking tank, the tomb of their fallen colleague. The fire caused the shells to explode. The turret blew up. The tank is unrecognizable. Grief and fear naturally intertwine in the hearts of my Africans, waiting behind their armor. Death is part of our commitment, the death of the enemy, but also our own and that of our brothers in arms. Saying it is one thing, looking it in the eyes and carrying on in a risk zone is another. I salute my captain. Everything depends on him. His men are looking at him. If he falters, if he backs down, they'll give up. He knows this. His role can be summed up in one verb: to command. Commanding implies listening, understanding, explaining, showing compassion, giving clear and feasible orders, setting an example, holding others to high standards, and motivating. It also means getting right back up when you get knocked down and telling the truth to leaders and subordinates with no pretense of demagogy. This is precisely what we learn in training school and that we pass on from generation to generation on a daily basis, the tradition of leadership so central to the military profession and identity, the key to our DNA. The Puma takes off again. I fly over the armored column, the martyred tank, the captain standing alone, raising his head with a helmet in hand. This army is only as good as its leaders and the men they command. The helicopter resumes its northbound course. I drop Gougeon off and he joins his CAT 3 facing the gorge. In a few hours, two of his infantry units and his combat engineers will cross CAT 4's position and head into the valley, taking the lead as we advance.

Twenty years later, the time of the marshals

In Tessalit, we take another look at the paper and 3D maps of this long valley to imagine all the best positions for an ambush. All our aircraft, helicopter, tank, and infantry optics are peering into this several mile-long corridor, surmounted by ridges and blocked by natural dams of stones and rocks. In Gao, Denis finished his report on Operation Doro 3: enemy losses, but also weapons, explosives, telephones, pickups, and documents to be exploited. In the South, our armored vehicles avoided the danger of mines. They were often alerted by locals, who remain very supportive. In Timbuktu, the squadron has begun patrolling not along the Niger River, but north into the Sahara. The CP is preparing an upcoming raid in the direction of the Araouane erg, 185 miles further north. The first order of

business is to find decent roads for this new raid. Late in the afternoon, the corporal's remains arrived by helicopter. His body will be placed in a tent next to the field hospital, in a coffin covered with a simple French flag. Throughout the night, he will be watched over in silence by camp soldiers, two of them standing guard at all times. Twenty years earlier, in Bihac, when I was captain of my company, I had watched over Chief Brigadier Dubrulle, one of the first cavalrymen killed in Otoka by a sniper. On their own initiative, my Gauls had spent the whole night in successive groups watching over our brother in arms. A few days later, the cavalry and Gauls found themselves engaged in a series of fights on the Skokovi pass. One of my NCOs was shot and wounded. Machine gun fire pounded the armor of the APCs and armored vehicles stuck in the valley. Fire discipline, the hallmark of professional troops, had been scrupulously observed. The men had not given in to fear and hatred. Our adversaries who had become enemies during an ambush, had suffered losses and measured the determination of the French peacekeepers. The snipers' house was destroyed with a 20 mm chain gun. Strength respects strength and crushes the weak. Leaders at all levels had commanded their men and the cohesion of the company had been strengthened. For the past 20 years, on the anniversary of this skirmish, my NCO and I have called or texted each other. He was part of my company, of my family, and he will remain so. Now a sergeant major, Ducellier is president of the NCOs of the 92nd Inf Rgt, one of those "marshals" who speak the language of truth, even when you don't want to hear it, and who ensures the cohesion and solidity of our institution through dialogue.

After the evening situation update, I isolate myself with Rémi to finalize the program for the funeral ceremony that will take place the next morning on this strip that we crossed two days before to salute the Adrar fighters, and the one who was going to die. For the fourth time, I take out my old fountain pen and my thoughts take me back to France, to the parents and the wife of one of my fallen soldiers. Whatever the outcome of this campaign, however brilliant the final victory may be, I know that they will mourn for the rest of their lives, and future generations will bear the burden of this tragedy in their memories. Words cannot replace a loved one, but it is the duty of the leader to write, to explain, and to empathize. For me, these four evenings of mourning and writing were the worst part of this operation. They were a negligible but indispensable contribution to the families' bereavement. As I reread Alexandre Van Dooren's file, searching for my words, my mind drifts to the grave of Albert Compain whom we had saluted three months earlier with three

other Porpoises from Angoulême. No doubt they are together now in the paradise of soldiers and heroes, having fought and fallen for their country, far from their families. I keep this community of fates and sorrows to myself, fully convinced that these two men did not die in vain. As long as young French people enlist willingly to defend their country and put their lives at risk, as long as France accepts the price of blood, she will be respected and feared, she will be able to defend her values, her interests, and peace for her citizens in our homeland. The letters are finished. I'll sleep on it before one final review. They will not leave until the next day with the Transall after the ceremony.

Monday, March 18

Farewell to the corporal, the search of Terz

It is still dark when I wake up. The operations room is quiet. The CAT 3 units began their maneuver up along the jihadist trail. The artillery is in place. In Tessalit, like every morning, the corporal and his two men on duty have just hoisted the French flag. Today, they stopped at half-mast. At this moment, as in France and at our bases around the world, people stop and salute the flag as it is raised, whether they are dressed or, as here, about to shave with their canteen cup sitting on the hood of a vehicle. All the barracks and bases are flying the flag at half-mast. The military community shows solidarity for the brigade fighters. The army salutes the memory of Corporal Van Dooren and supports those who are fighting. At 7 am, all the men present are gathered in a square. Following a sober ceremony, the men present arms and the coffin is carried out of a small building by six Porpoises from the 1st. The heat is already overwhelming, the light is blinding. Words are read to pay tribute to our corporal. "*Corporal Van Dooren, you died in combat, at your post. Your sacrifice brings us back once again to the harsh reality of war… Alexandre, when the three colors, the symbol of our homeland, are lowered to half-mast in every French regiment, it is an entire army, your family, and through it the entire nation that will pay you a somber but heartfelt homage, an homage merited by one of its sons, who died a hero.*" The small truck slowly leaves the large glacis, joining the airstrip and the Transall from Bamako.

The morning will be busy agreeing upon a shared vision with my two deputy commanders and our chiefs of staff on the evolution of the brigade. This is an expensive operation and the staffing levels must be adjusted to the situation without jeopardizing those who will remain.

The Chadians have blocked the valley, the infantrymen from the 126th Inf Rgt stationed in Brive overtook the armored vehicles of the 1st,

then the legionnaires of the Foreign Legion Para Rgt. With their fellow combat engineers, they advance cautiously, searching rocks and caves as they go. At the same time, the CAT 4 paratroopers branched off, also on foot, toward the defile, taking it from behind. They will find recently deserted bivouac sites, equipment, and combat dugouts. The vehicles would never have made it through the defile. Taking it from behind was the best decision. The fighters fly over the Adrar, ready to deliver fire. Our helicopters fly over the valleys in successive patrols. At any moment, we expect an ambush or an immobilizing battle, organized or isolated, especially since the valley is much narrower than the Ametettai. There are several ideal combat positions for the enemy. The CP officers and I follow the vanguard units on the digital map. I put the map of the valley in my small office, covered with a transparent plastic, and we watch the infantry units advance as the hours pass.

But where are the hostages?

At the same time, my CP in Gao, with whom I am in regular contact, tells me that they will soon be able to explore new areas where MUJWA terrorists and concentrations of ammunition and equipment may be located. A quick study of the situation and requirements coming down from Paris naturally leads me to direct my teams of planners to start anticipating. For me, the priority is to mop up the Adrar, search the valleys, leave nothing to chance, then as soon as possible to shift our efforts to the Niger bend. This maneuver of successive actions will give me the time I need to meet the demand for troop withdrawals without giving our enemy the impression that we are turning from the fight. If everything continues at this rate, it will take us ten days, with our Chadian allies, to be certain that there are no more coordinated forces the size of a katiba (about 100 men) hidden in the massif.

To accomplish this, I identify two areas on the map where my infantrymen will have to go: Terz and the Assamalmal Valley in the south. These searches will have to be accompanied by continuous observation and later concentric armored raids around the massif to check for remote camps and light vehicle movements. "*Always thinking about them, but never talking about them*," we have not forgotten about the hostages, the needles hidden in a desert of stone and sand haystacks. We know that they are the priority targets of our special forces. Although we do not always have the intel we want, we have always tried to maintain a small airmobile reserve to intercept with our own means any suspicious movement, especially on the outskirts of the sector. The further south we go, the more we see the borders of the Tigharghar. If they avoid the fight, the enemy could try to escape to

a neighboring country or to Kidal, the nearest town. Like herd dogs, our Tigers monitor and sometimes intercept isolated vehicles near the massif with small teams in Pumas, without success. While the infantrymen climb the ridges of Terz and the combat engineers clear the roads in an infernal heat, the two CPs prepare for the future. I have instructed the main CP in Gao to consider the best possible planning of successive actions compatible with a withdrawal in early April. At the forward CP in Tessalit, I ask them when we can end our search of the Tigharghar, taking into account our current pace of progress. The goal is to finish in the North and continue in the South, keeping a close eye on Timbuktu, which could be attacked by terrorists on the run. Information from locals has been predicting this since the beginning of the operations, though precisions are lacking.

CAT 3 is in the valley. The Bisons and legionnaires found ammunition, food supplies, and abandoned firing positions as they advanced, as well as buried mines. In some places, razor blades and shaved beards attest to the terrorists' haste and willingness to blend in with the local population. As the hours go by, it becomes clear that the enemy has abandoned the valley before the battle, certain that we would fight and dislodge them, as we did in the Ametettai.

The CPs are considering the possibility of transporting the paratroopers by helicopter to the entrance of the cirque before wrapping up the search in the valley. The lack of precise intel on potential hiding places, the distances, and the low availability of helicopters dissuade us from doing so. In the evening, artillery fire echoes throughout the valley. A vehicle was detected. Helicopters fly over the area to no avail. We spend the evening chatting with the journalists over a dinner of field rations. They return from the valley and will prepare their reports, satisfied with their coverage.

Tuesday, March 19

Panther 6, Day 6

This valley is a furnace

Terz will not be a repeat of Ametettai. We later learn that this valley was the fallback position of its big sister in the north, but the surviving terrorists preferred to flee the area without fighting. Many have lost their leaders and have returned to their country or to more hospitable areas. For the time being, I feel it is essential to go ahead and find my two colonels and explain to them the future missions that are in the works, to get their opinion, and to evaluate the men's ability to continue under this fiery sun. "*It is the front that commands*," here too. I take Puma to Terz where the

armored CAT 3's CP is located, between two hillocks. The radio APCs and CP surround the tables, chairs, and maps. I recognize my old non-commissioned officers from Angoulême, whom I rubbed shoulders with often, on the firing ranges and during maneuvers in France. They are at their posts, also overwhelmed by the heat. The water bottles are over 105 °F. We are a long way from the freezing winters of the Balkans and Afghanistan. We share a field ration, as we did a few months before in the Canjuers training camp, between two armored combat exercises, just like the ones going on here, but this time for real. The cold beer from the squadron's base is missing, the Charentais wine too, and we laugh heartily as we evoke these simple pleasures that we will soon go home to.

It's 1 pm and it feels like fire is falling from the sky in the Adrar. The outposts are closing in on the line held by the Chadians at the eastern end of the valley. The combat engineers continue to clear mines on their knees in the valley, wearing bulletproof vests and helmets. The tracks are very narrow and the terrain is rough. The column of steel advances slowly without engaging its tanks, fuel trucks, and maintenance vehicles. At the front, light bulldozers flatten out bumps and small trenches so the valley can be crossed. Without them, it would be impossible to move forward or turn back. Gougeon is optimistic. He knows that we will let the horses go once we have linked up with the Chadians, that our time in the Adrar is winding down and the beginning of our withdrawal is near.

Rémi, my bodyguard, and I make our way to the CAT 4 CP a little further back, first by APC, then by helicopter. In the armored vehicle, the thermometer reads 133 °F. This satellite-equipped vehicle arrived directly from Afghanistan a month ago. Its portholes are blocked by permanent antennas. The CAT 4 CP is set up at the base of some small boulders. A few small tarps provide some shade, but the heat is unbearably the same. We exchange our opinions with Desmeulles on the ability of his paratroopers to last and their needs. The CP is barren, a few radios in backpacks, foldable maps, and water bottles. In a few minutes, I went from an armored CP to a paratrooper CP. The diversity and similarity of our command capabilities are summarized and brought together in this valley, in two different versions. The former is better suited to armored raids and wide open spaces, the latter to compartmentalized terrain and to the slow and essential progression of infantrymen in difficult terrain. Both CPs follow the same method of reasoning and have efficient communication links with the artillery liason officers and air officers at the CP in Tessalit. Here again, the rustic conditions are in stark contrast with the satellite technology that ensures our tactical superiority. I meet Warrant Officer Cristian

again from Timbuktu, the one who guided me and accompanied me to René Caillié's house. He is always smiling. He is a paratrooper commando and was placed at the CP to follow up on field intel. Insightful, observant, and a fine tactician, he has a keen sense of what is going on. We discuss the terrorists' escape, the destroyed tank on the trail, and the terrain. He shows me a map of the valley on which he has placed all the identified shooting positions, the firing angles, and the withdrawal positions and routes. It's professional work, prepared well in advance, and adapted to the valley and its inroads.

Terrorist computers reveal their secrets

The searches continue. Laptops—some with touch screens—are found nearby. They contain every conceivable course to become the perfect terrorist: handling explosives, decapitating people, and filming battle scenes to rousing background music. A company has just found a camouflaged pickup equipped with a Soviet 23 mm twin-barreled autocannon, a formidable weapon that can fire at armored vehicles and infantrymen more than a mile away. The tires are punctured and the chassis is damaged, the terrorists abandoned it without taking the time to booby trap it with explosives. In our AQIM katiba identification books, this is the most dangerous weapon. Seeing it abandoned without a fight gives us an idea of how defeated and terrified they are. The vehicle was later evacuated from the valley, repaired by legionnaires, and sent to its final resting place in a museum in Calvi dedicated to the 2nd Foreign Legion Para Rgt, as a reminder of this operation. It's time to go to Tessalit and prepare for the future with the forward CP. The afternoon is spent reconciling what we want with what is possible, quickly wrapping up in the North in order to shift our efforts to the Niger bend and meet the required drawdown of forces set for next month.

During the first month of engagement, the CP designed its operations from Bamako to Timbuktu and Gao, closely following the successive arrival of units from African bases and France. After a month and a half of raids and battles in a country twice the size of France, plans are needed for the successive repatriation of units without slowing down the pace of operations, and without giving the enemy the impression of a logistical pause. This is a far cry from the Gulf War and the separate plans for deploying and withdrawing forces over several months. The force is not the same size, and we have to move quickly, especially since our African allies are with us and our units will be relieved, replaced by Nigerien, Chadian, and Burkinabé contingents, in addition to the Malian battalions. In close liaison with the G08 FCP, the main CP begins planning work needed for

future activities. By its very nature, planning is constantly evolving and has to be flexible and open to avoid getting backed into a single, unattainable solution. Too many examples from history have shown that the stubborn pursuit of a well-thought-out plan can lead to disaster, when the general staff or the commander refuses to see it as a living entity that must constantly adapt. The difficulty lies in knowing at what point it is no longer possible to delay the plan's execution without jeopardizing the success of the mission and the safety of the troops. Anticipation and planning are essential. They reduce risk, without avoiding it altogether.

Returning from Terz, we finalize the future operations, taking into account the colonels' opinions about their ability to continue, the logistical constraints, and us knowing of the possible enemy inroads to the east of the Tigharghar massif. Even though everyone's attention is focused on the valley and the upcoming link up with the Chadians, my priority has turned toward the future. We need to coordinate with our allies, plan armored raids and airmobile support, and relieve crews and units that have been drained by several weeks under a sweltering sun. Our armored vehicles need a break, too. We are pushing them beyond what they are capable of.

The red-hot sun has run its course. It's time for the evening situation update, for the informal and friendly get-togethers in front of the CP, for the long-awaited moment of relaxation. I have voluntarily included seven visiting journalists to give them a better idea of where we are and what we are experiencing during this operation. I know some of them, they were with us when we liberated Timbuktu at the end of January or during the fighting in Gao last month. We have come a long way in the last two months, sharing so much, experiencing so much tension when faced with the unknown. All these trials have brought us closer together. This time, at the entrance to the building of the small CP of the 71st Mixed Regiment of the Malian army, we talk about the press briefings around the vehicles in Goundam a few hours before liberating Timbuktu, under the only rain we have experienced since our arrival, and the aftermath of the fighting in the streets of Gao before leaving for the Adrar. We know we are experiencing an extraordinary campaign where danger is omnipresent, but so is inspiration and panache. Liberating a people and eradicating the last armed resistance in the middle of a desert is not something you do every day. These journalists are familiar with war. For some, it is their vocation, their livelihood, their *raison d'être*, and we respect and appreciate them for what they represent, witnesses of history who explain and show the reality of the world by taking risks, with diminished logistical support, strong pressure from their editors, and increasingly limited means. Our profes-

sion is different, but the shared adventure, the rustic living conditions, and the desire for efficiency bring us closer together in this inhospitable land. The situation report ends with a collective awareness of our forthcoming departure and the end of operations in the North.

Wednesday, March 20

The Chadians are within reach

I am up again before the sun. A light breeze sweeps through the camp, stirring up some dry grass. The sun reemerges between the rocky peaks of the massif. Further south, Bisons, Porpoises, and legionnaires resume their advance in the mineral thalwegs. The eastern outlet of the wadi is not far away and the valley starts to become wider. The Chadians are within reach. This is the moment when coordination becomes crucial, a phase where the real danger can come from friendly fire. This is all the more true as our modes of action and our equipment are different, and a misunderstanding is always possible. The historical examples are numerous, so Xavier and I remind the officers in charge of operations to remind their men of the precautions to be taken on both sides to avoid stupid and senseless losses.

The morning promises to be calm. It is therefore time to move forward on "organic" peacetime issues, human resources (HR) planning, and the change of command for brigade leaders. By telephone, I check with my executive officer in Clermont-Ferrand on the annual change of command plan, the future of subordinates, their schooling, and their rotations. Our men cannot be reduced to labels. They have legitimate aspirations for promotion, a healthy work-life balance, and rely on their superiors to reconcile their interests with the smooth functioning of an institution in constant flux. We cannot ask young soldiers, fathers of families, to go and fight in distant lands and explain to them that their future does not depend on those who lead and command them. Command relationships form an inseparable whole where the term responsibility takes on its full meaning. I call my usual contacts 3,000 miles from Tessalit to ensure that the expectations of my subordinates have been taken into account, to discuss possible transfers, and give an opinion on opportunities depending on professional and family concerns. It's a discussion between managers, but also between soldiers.

In front of the CP, Father Christophe has set up a field table and covered it with a sheet. He celebrates his morning mass, facing the immense surroundings without proselytizing. It's a brief and intense mass. Officers

and soldiers are mixed together, each with their own history and faith. Two nurses are present. They know the padre, a regular at the field hospital.

In the afternoon, Denis tells me that Paris is in a hurry to withdraw resources and to find our missing hostages. There are reports that Philippe Verdon was killed by terrorists. This reinforces our idea to resume searches further south, even though we know that teams and special forces have been dedicated to these objectives since the beginning. At the same time, the main CP is actively preparing an operation north of Timbuktu, near Faguibine Lake and the Araouane Erg. Here again, the distances are carefully measured, nearly 200 miles of sand to cover. An airmobile raid is being considered, consisting of dropping a section of 40 infantrymen off by helicopter from an intermediate point, but no one really knows who lives in this small village of huts, lost in the sands. AQIM terrorists have been reported, probably fleeing Timbuktu and Ametettai. It seems to me too risky to send an isolated section, even for a few hours, without being able to provide it with permanent armed helicopter cover and medical evacuation. We will have to go there by vehicle, even light ones, from the Niger bend. The Timbuktu squadron is ideal for this raid, but it still needs to be relieved at the airport by our African allies. Leaving a small detachment alone and therefore vulnerable is out of the question. The defense plan requires a unit—at least 100 troops—to defend this strategic site. No matter how much pressure is put on the CPs, we cannot bend the principles of war.

The reality of Terz is catching up with us. The Chadians, sensing our infantrymen nearby, resumed their advance westward into the valley. They even crossed a coordination line that we had set for them to avoid the risk of friendly fire. We ask them to fall back and wait for us on this line. Our units are moving fast, without any enemy resistance, and they should link up in a matter of hours. There is no way we are going to lose people stupidly. CAT 3 was able to establish contact with the LU and the artillerymen detached to our allies. Panther 6 will be finished tomorrow. At the same time, the CP in Bamako orders us on a distant mission further east, incompatible with the continuation of our search in the Adrar and its eastern and southern edges, the cirque, and the area of caves and gardens that we have named Jason 1. The discussions with the CP in Gao having yielded nothing, I call Grégoire to carry on in the Adrar, to continue with the Chadians, and not to change our recon plan. He's had a rough day. The exchange is quick and friendly. We trust each other. Tomorrow, General Ract Madoux, Chief of Staff of the Army, will be visiting us. He will arrive for the end of Panther 6, in time to see the two CATs deployed before returning to Gao and the Southern Zone.

Thursday, March 21

Attack on the Timbuktu post

It is still dark when I wake up. The TOC warns me that the Timbuktu position—the airport held by the squadron and a Malian detachment—has been attacked during the night. Denis explains the situation to me. The main CP controls the maneuver to give the captain as many reinforcements as there are available. Captain Aurélien's Seahorses don't have the manpower or resources of an infantry unit, but they've been preparing for a surprise attack for weeks. The fire and defense plans are known, the observation and combat posts are well protected. Night observation capabilities are limited, but the machine guns are well positioned and flares have been distributed. The terrorist attack took place before 11 pm. A suicide bomber blew up the Malian roadblock just before the airport. Immediately, pickups and terrorists tried to overrun the French positions with the firm intention of taking us by surprise to inflict losses. Several dozen armed men attacked the defensive positions. Rockets are launched into the sky. Kalashnikovs are visible and shine in the night. The enemy is 15 yards away and attacks. They are repelled by chain guns and FAMAS machine guns. A fighter takes off from Bamako and heads east with laser-guided bombs under its wings. We need to hold fast. During this first hour, when the unit is alone, everyone is fighting in the dark, trying to save their skin and unaware if the enemy has made it through the perimeter. It's a long, tense hour of the 32-year-old captain commanding his men over the radio or yelling out orders.

The Malians do not have radios and we have to be careful not to mistake them for terrorists. Friendly fire is always a risk and cause for concern when a leader comes under fire. The fighting will last for five hours straight. No one made it through the perimeter and the terrorists lost many men, killed and wounded. The company warrant officer, normally responsible for the meals and living conditions of the troops, went around the posts, bringing long-awaited ammunition just in time. The terrorists understand that time is no longer on their side. The noise from the jet engines and exploding bombs and shells do not seem to discourage them. The assault resumes at close range. Our Malian allies have linked up with us. They took their wounded to the doctor and maneuvered to try to trap the assault group that managed to escape just in time with some of their dead. At dawn, the sentries found terrorists killed a few yards from the posts. Equipped with explosive belts, they were planning to blow themselves up in the middle of our lines. We are a long way from what we've encountered in different parts of Africa. These are the hallmarks of Islamic terrorists who offer a

ticket to paradise in exchange for their sacrifice and often coerce them into fighting. Timbuktu withstood the attack, but the wake-up call was harsh: we are now fighting on three fronts, each one 300 miles apart. The trained, motivated, and well-commanded units held their ground and defended their positions dearly, well aware that their survival depended on it. The permanent rebalancing of supports and reinforcements will be studied in the light of the outcome of these last operations. We need to improve intel on enemy capabilities around Timbuktu and their intentions. At the same time, without leaving Gao undermanned as it needs to defend its position and continue its missions, we are studying the reinforcements that can be taken from an engaged unit. The unit in Timbuktu has been isolated for over a month. They have repelled the enemy's attacks, but will live in fear for several more weeks, dreading other attacks that will eventually come. We know very well how this can stress out the troops. For them, there is no safe space, no place where they can rest and rely on the walls of a forward operating base, or "FOB" as veterans from Afghanistan would call it. Given the size of the outpost, everyone must return to their post and hope they don't get attacked while sleeping. Timbuktu, the first major city to be liberated, was attacked, perhaps even by survivors, fleeing from the Adrar. No one is safe. The instructions are sent out to all the posts to remain grouped, armed, attentive, and, if possible, protected by armor, or at least wear a helmet and a bulletproof vest.

Replenished, the Chadians return to the south, to the cirque of Assamalmal

In Tessalit and Terz, the units have learned that the Porpoises successfully repelled a terrorist attack during the night. The sun is rising. In response to a request from my Chadian counterpart, we have delivered several thousand gallons of fuel to enable the National Guard's pickups and machine gunners to continue their mission. The delivery was dropped by parachute. This time, we could not supply them on the way to Aguelhok in the valley, firstly, because Terz is too narrow to cross with two columns, and secondly, because we were counting on them to continue operations together in the south. Barely refueled, we learn of their departure for Jason 1, en route to the cirque. The cirque itself is 10 miles in diameter, flat as a table, and surrounded by inaccessible cliffs except for the southern tracks which lead to Jason. For two years at Matignon, I read and synthesized service reports. This area is no stranger to me. We know it is heavily mined and easily defensible. The nearby caves are ideal hiding places for hostages, for sheltering reinforcements, equipment, and makeshift hospitals. In Kidal, there are rumors that in the southern part of it a hundred or so women and children of terrorist leaders and fighters are being sheltered

to prevent them from falling into the hands of the French and Chadians. Some even speak of a deterioration in their conditions and of the terrorists' desire to see them perish rather than fall into the hands of the allies. The worst rumors surround this area between the hostages and the sacrificed families, the last place to be conquered. One could almost compare the south of the Adrar to the Japanese islands of 1945 and the sacrifice of the Japanese population.

It is barely 8 am and we are preparing for the arrival of General Ract Madoux (CSA), accompanied by Grégoire and General Dembélé, who is apparently happy to see Tessalit again, a base he knows well having been stationed there for several years. After a quick briefing in the CP, the Puma helicopters take off for Terz where the CAT 3 CP is waiting for him. Under a shade netting, Gougeon explains the past operation in the presence of his commanders and captains. Some of the spoils were placed next to the vehicles: weapons and medical equipment, mostly stolen from hospitals in the South. Despite the scorching heat, the CSA took the time to walk around the CP and talk with the soldiers. Demanding and humane, this cavalry officer perfectly embodies the function of the leader of our army. The second visit, quite different, was reserved for the CAT 4 CP: about 30 men sheltered from the sun under large black rocks. A few radio and satellite antennas maintain contact with the brigade CP, the companies, and planes. Desmeulles gives us an overview. Everything is black and barren. The land formations are endlessly similar. It feels like we are on Mars. Warrant Officer Cristian hands us a bottle of water covered with a wet sock, placed in the shade, an old Saharan trick that almost renders a drink cold. Indeed, we appreciate this 86 °F water, 25° cooler than the temperature outside.

The helicopter returns to the position. Smoke marks the landing location. At the same time, the legionnaires are searching the valleys next to Terz in the direction of In Tegant to make sure they did leave any stone unturned. The next objective of the Northern Front will be Assamalmal and its cirque. The hours fly by quickly. We are back at the camp. Two hundred troops gather to listen to the chief's words of encouragement, the unconditional support and pride of France and its army, and the feedback from our extremely pleased American allies. This visit is heart-warming, because for almost a month now, the units have been deployed without any connection back home: no radio and no internet. The minister's visit on March 7th instilled them with confidence, and today's visit confirms the validity of their commitment and the recognition of their peers and the nation. After sharing a ration with the men at the CP, the general leaves

us in a Transall for Gao, the Southern Front and the other Africans in the Niger bend.

Things are picking up again. Terz is over. We need to confirm the launch of Panther 8, Jason, the cirque, and the eastern edge of the massif. Fighters will once again be able to provide us with the necessary support. Logistics will continue its efforts to supply us, transport planes, convoys on the Trans-Saharan, and Algerian gasoline. We must not delay. This is an expensive operation, and I want to be able to give a final push in the South before the rainy season and gale winds arrive in May.

Armored raid and heliborne commandos to the south of the massif

The CP prepared a new Panther operation based on the intel they had. The company of Bisons is within range of the northern foothills of the cirque, but the trails are poor and their progress along this slope would be visible from a great distance. An airmobile raid to cover the objective of the southern exits of the cave area is still a possibility, as well as an armored raid to be carried out with the Chadians. To gain the element of surprise, we choose what we call the "War College Solution," i.e. a mix of differentiated solutions with the best benefits and limited risks. CAT 3 will leave Terz early in the morning without any warning signs and will reach the south of the massif to cut off the retreat from possible escapees and to search the garden area, together with the Chadians who are already in position near Jason. To ensure observation in this area, we decide to heliport the paratrooper commando unit to a key position on the ground. This is in keeping with their capabilities and if they are attacked, I feel that between the armed helicopters and Gougeon's armor, they will not be isolated for long on terrain that is favorable to them. The orders are given in this sense, the LU warns our allies with whom we are in almost permanent contact. Our commandos are ready. They will take off at night.

We have more details on the Timbuktu attack, and Denis intends to propose solutions to reinforce the airport. The CP unwinds after an intense few days and the CSA visit. With Rémi, we cross the camp at night to connect with the paratrooper commando unit (PCU) that I want to see before they leave. It's dark. They are gathered in a semi-circle, and I explain what I expect from them. They will not be alone for long if the position is attacked. Since February 16th and the death in action of their colleague Harold Vormezeele, they have been aware of what the enemy is capable of and the need to be united. Most of them are from the Foreign Legion Para Rgt and the 17th Para Eng Rgt. They are used to working together, grouped for centralized missions under the orders of the brigade. I shake

their hands firmly before they return to the Adrar, without any drama or bluster. This is no place for a Hollywood casting! During the night, the Pumas fly toward the garden area.

Friday, March 22

"Serving Serval"

It is not yet 6 am. The 50 vehicles are assembled in several columns, ready to leave, just like every third day, for Gao. The logistics detachment is commanded by a young officer from the 511th Transportation Regiment. He introduces me to a hundred drivers, captains, and machine gunners. I made a point of seeing them too, to tell them once again that every operation depends on overland supplies, on the countless tons of water and ammunition that they dutifully transport to insecure areas. Without these columns of ants, everything would stop in two days. One cannot help but think of the Sacred Way road during WWI and the dedication of the anonymous and unsung heroes without whom Verdun's infantrymen and artillerymen would not have stood their ground. Tessalit cannot be compared to the battles of WWI, but without these brave women and men, Serval would have been an impossible operation. A few armored vehicles accompany our old trucks like herd dogs ready to bite or call in the fighters and helicopters. The trucks are over 20 years old. They are worn out, but their crews make the most of them, while waiting for the next MLC (multipurpose land carrier), which has been regularly postponed, like many small, but essential, armament programs. Combat service support, as they are known, rarely gets any press coverage, but their role is indispensable. This lieutenant who greets me reminds me of these young officers of the supply train that we crossed paths with during the Cold War in Germany. They also took part in the great maneuvers that we regularly conducted out in open terrain. At the time, hundreds of trucks followed the armored divisions during exercises, dozens of patrols organized the flow of traffic on the routes heading east, routes used by our mechanized armored regiments which were training to carry out large movements at night, sheltered from Soviet fighters. An armored division of 10,000 men crossed the Neckar amphibiously and using engineer-built bridges in one night, without light. I was a mechanized infantry lieutenant and my tracked vehicles and conscripts moved at the pace of the logistics lieutenants who led these complex maneuvers with their men, who were also conscripts, waiting for hours and days in the rain and snow, to support the combatants out on the front lines. Few people now know about that time; it was a different war, the war of their fathers, but the forces are the same. The column has left, "Serving Serval" is their motto.

It is 8 am, and Xavier comes out of the TOC. He announces the arrival of a very special Chadian plane. It contains several tons of fresh meat and is transporting the President of the National Assembly, as well as a dozen parliamentarians who come to meet and congratulate their men in the field. They have to leave in the evening, but they are counting on us to take them to the permanent bivouac in Aguelhok. The bagged meat is trucked to the base while we invite our allies to the CP. The president wears a large tricolor scarf. He listens carefully as I summarize the operations in front of the map in my office, emphasizing the cooperation of our two contingents. I tell him that his troops are engaged on the other side of the Adrar, but he insists on meeting those in Aguelhok. They leave for Aguelhok in four Puma helicopters at 10 am. The Pumas will pick them up at the end of the day, after the national cohesion barbecue, so they can return home from Tessalit in their twin-engine Antonov. At the same time, CAT 3 is conducting an armored raid in the south and the garden area, which it reached in the early afternoon, without any enemy resistance. General Déby has resumed his advance in an attempt to reach the cirque via the Jason crossroads and the cave area. His combat engineers lead the way, clearing mines, followed by armored pickups. The defiles are narrow and the natural scree prevents the vehicles from reaching the cirque. Reconnaissance is postponed to the next day. Our search in this deserted area comes up empty handed: no water and no signs of life. Further south, the small sandy valleys contrast with Jason's mineral landscape. The Porpoises have linked up with the PCU: nothing to report on either side, except a few shepherds and animals grouped around the wells in small palm groves. The lines of penetration are very wide, which makes it difficult to booby trap the roads; and yet the area is rife with IEDs, mines identified by distinctive signs—a pile of stones, a row of stones, a piece of cloth on a stick—known to the terrorists and locals. A few days earlier, a Chadian was killed by a lone terrorist in this area. The invisible danger contrasts with the beauty of the site. The PCU returns via Puma in the late afternoon. They resume a special mission they had been assigned after Terz: intercept vehicles and suspicious caravans. Formalized with the HU, this mission involves an airmobile interception detachment composed of 20 to 30 PCU personnel on foot, four Pumas, and armed Gazelle and Tiger helicopters. The latter stop vehicles using their dissuasive presence, or after firing warning shots, before the commandos are dropped off to search them. Many missions will be carried out in this manner, either through random patrols or based on air intel, putting a lot of pressure on the terrorists.

The last terrorists have fled the massif

The center of gravity has shifted to the southern part of the Tigharghar. We are leaving the Terz Valley. The armored vehicles are left in the south, and the paratroopers are returning to Tessalit. The enemy ran from the fight. We would later learn that this valley was the Ametettai's fallback zone, but that after the initial fighting the hard-pressed katibas were no longer able to withstand a second major setback. The terrorists fled into the desert, to towns, or back to their countries, considering their contracts with defeated leaders null and void. The survivors now prefer to run away until they can regroup to carry out attacks and inflict casualties on us or terrorize the liberated populations. Following the patterns of asymmetric warfare, we expect the enemy to resort to violent raids like they did in Timbuktu and Gao, to mining roads, and to targeted assassinations of locals. Terz and Assamalmal did not play out like in Ametettai, but we had to be sure of it so I gave myself a few more days to search the southern zone and conduct concentric raids from Tessalit to Kidal, to resume major movements and look for clues of hostages—the needles in this massive haystack. We know that time is of the essence and that a small council will soon set the timetable for withdrawals. Despite the wear and tear on personnel and vehicles, we have to plan a final week of operations before returning to Gao and withdrawing troops from Tessalit and the G08 CP.

Paris and Bamako are urging the brigade to carry out operations from Timbuktu along the Niger or north of it near Araouane and Faguibine Lake to the west, the land of Joffre's battles in 1894. We have reports from locals that the terrorists are preparing an offensive. The squadron is alone with Malian reinforcements. Splitting it in two to keep the airport safe and going blindly north and west, without infantry reinforcements, additional helicopters, or the support of African allies, seems to me a dangerous risk. I cannot forget the massacre of the Bonnier column that was surprised and overwhelmed by an early morning attack. I make it known that I refuse to weaken the defenses of Timbuktu even for a few days. I have no illusions; our positions are being spied on and observed by an enemy that is not stupid. A destitute post that cannot be reinforced would quickly become a target of choice, especially since, in this area, the enemy can regroup quickly and quite discreetly unlike in the Adrar where the area is monitored. We need to reinforce the post with infantry to defend the airport and take advantage of their more advanced night vision capabilities, then carry out distant operations with the squadron and their light armored vehicles, which are particularly suited to this type of autonomous mission. By the end of March, the African contingents will begin to arrive on the Niger

bend. The tripartite meetings, initiated and closely followed at the regional level by Grégoire, are bearing fruit. Motivated and mobilized, our African allies from Burkina Faso and Niger will be arriving soon in Timbuktu and Menaka. Our replacements are coming which will allow us to resume our movements and to decrease our troop levels, only three months after the Guepard QRF was deployed, an unprecedented feat.

Saturday, March 23

Deep in the Adrar

The Chadians didn't find anything. CAT 3 wraps up its reconnaissance of the oases. The Bisons north of the cirque are waiting for future orders. It's time to take a look at these positions before we pull the units back. I invite the journalists, whom I met the night before, to accompany me to see the infantry company, fly over the cirque, and return by flying around the Adrar. The heat is not letting up, but no one is running out of water. Boxes of water packs line the bottom of armored vehicles and helicopters. The infantrymen from the 126th suffer from the heat, yet they dutifully wear helmets and bulletproof vests in their APCs and while on foot, observing from unshaded crests facing south. The regiment they came from sacrificed itself at the Battle of the Berezina to allow the Grand Army to withdraw to General Éblé's bridges in 1812. These men are part of that enduring and silent infantry that wins wars without boasting about it. They are the worthy heirs of the Grumblers and the poilus* who were always on the front line. It was with men like them that the French army made it all the way to Moscow. This is the picture I paint for the journalists, a picture that will be repainted, like that of the "dungeon," during the fall of the Ametettai.

The flight over the cirque will be remembered by all those present. Seeing this geological anomaly on a map is one thing, but swooping down into a basin and flying over the flat mineral desert surrounded by cliffs for dozens of miles is both grandiose and frightening. The mechanic turns around. We share the same thought. A breakdown is out of the question, lest we get stuck in this burning oven with no signs of life, neither animal nor plant. We fly over Gougeon's CP further south, but it was so far that we had to abort the landing and return directly along the southern foothills at low altitude to Aguelhok and the camp. Seeing the terrain is essential to understand the difficulties facing the units, to push back against assumptions, and to prepare for the future. Our allies return to Aguelhok leaving CAT 3 with the heavy mortar section that we had detached to them. General Déby knows about the parliamentarians' visit and the arrival of fresh food. His men will also need a break.

Desmeulles is back. His legionnaires return to their barracks for the second time. Like everyone else, I take advantage of the jerry cans of well water to wash my clothes in a plastic basin and take a shower with my two bottles. In the evening, one of my non-commissioned officers from the 31st Eng Rgt stationed in Castelsarrasin comes to fetch me, as previously agreed. I have been invited to share a beer with the 12 mine-clearing divers from the specialized operational search (SOS) on the other side of the camp. They moved into a small house that was damaged, but still standing. There are candles on a makeshift table. They are my African combat engineers and they are honored and happy to take me away from the CP, to reserve a surprise for one of their own. Indeed, it is time to give Sergeant Alexandre his new staff sergeant stripes. Before he realizes what is going on, I call him out for his non-regulatory dress. The sergeant turns pale and stammers. I call him to attention and put his new stripe on his chest while giving him a big pat on back, which causes an uproar of laughter. These men kayaked up the Niger at night to surprise terrorist sentries. They went to the Adrar and took part in the fight. They cleared the mines and saw the effects of our weapons on the corpses in the caves and around the burned-out pickups. The sight of the child soldiers remains engraved in their memory. Tonight we are gathered together. The beer is warm. It is strong, too, 8 or 9% alcohol, the only one available in Bamako, but we savor it nonetheless.

Sunday, March 24

The terrorists are defeated again in Gao

The enemy attacked Gao again during the night. Suicide bombers infiltrated the town and attacked a Malian unit, which immediately retaliated. A French section in AIFVs joined the fight to support them near the school, while a company deployed to track them down. Informed by locals, the Franco-Malian units found the terrorists who had fled toward the cemetery where they were neutralized by the infantry and their armored vehicles, both French and Malian. The locals are gathering just behind these front-line soldiers and are angry with these terrorists. They have sticks and machetes in their hands, and the Gauls have to use their powers of persuasion to keep them away from the firefight. Denis and Bert are in charge of the maneuver. The chief of staff is looking at the map of Mali. Gao is lit up again as we wind down operations in the Adrar. We have to hold the airport, which requires a lot of infantrymen. Fewer sections are available.

All I have left are the two units from the 92nd, at most. Two of the eight sections went to Timbuktu to reinforce the squadron. It is time to re-

position the center of gravity of our forces on the Niger bend if we want to react effectively to incursions, especially as we need to start withdrawing troops. We are resolutely entering a new phase in which we must redraw the map of our positions and how many troops we can commit, while maintaining pressure on the enemy and our ability to react quickly. We are entering a delicate period where the teams have been all hands on deck for more than two months, without rest or comfort.

The "future maneuver" cell has created a synchro matrix—a timetable for planning operations and guarding outposts that takes into account unit withdrawals over the coming weeks. The equation has several unknowns and needs to be recalculated every day based on the availability of aircraft and the fluctuating disengagement dates, which are themselves preceded by the time required for equipment to be reintegrated into the theater and administrative formalities.

The Gao CP has adapted to this evolution and its planning cell has taken on a more important role, in liaison with the brigade's small team of logisticians who keep tabs on all the comings and goings as well as the emergencies.

In close liaison with Paris and Bamako, we are in a race against time that reminds us of what we experienced less than two months earlier but in the opposite direction, going from one CAT to four and now from four to one, while the HU remains unchanged. There is less pressure from the enemy, but the brigade is more dispersed. We do not yet know the size and organization of the future air-land force in Mali. All this is determined by the general staff of the armies and depends on political directives from the president, the minister of defense, and the latter's cabinet. In the basement of the strategic OCCC, we can only imagine the meticulous work of the officers preparing and proposing plans and flight schedules. At the other end of the chain, the brigade gives its opinion on the technical feasibility and adapts its deployed forces gradually.

This period from the end of March to the beginning of April will continue to be marked by back and forth plans and discussions between Paris, Bamako, and Gao. I set down two major and simultaneous requirements—to facilitate and succeed in rapidly reducing the size of the brigade force as instructed by Paris and to continue operations to maintain pressure on the enemy while focusing on three things: 1. Disengaging the two CATs from Tessalit and having them simultaneously search the remaining Assamalmal Valley and the eastern edges of the Tigharghar on their way to Gao; 2. Conducting a raid on Araouane north of Timbuktu; and 3. Reconnoitering

the remaining valleys of the Greater Gao. The operations plan involved taking a number of rapid and simultaneous measures in the Northern and Southern Zones: the forthcoming withdrawal of CAT 4 and the G08 FCP to France, the "descent" of CAT 3 to Gao by two different routes, the maintenance of a liaison and command detachment in Tessalit, the temporary reinforcement of Timbuktu so the squadron can head north to Araouane, and the resumption of search and destroy sorties around Gao. Clearly, the new orientations marked the end of the CP in Tessalit and my return to Gao in the coming days.

Xavier and Tessalit's close-knit team soon realized that these would be their last days in this overheated rock desert. All the work was monitored and conducted over the following days with the CP in Gao, which had set up the synchro matrix and sent back technical and capability advice after having had them validated by me. To make sure we didn't overlook anything, we had the idea to carry out a final operation—Operation Tiger—in the town of Tessalit, when we were only miles from Gao. Indeed, we had intercepted phone calls from AQIM in the town, and in particular near the abandoned town hall and the school. Since we couldn't search every house, we opted for the next best option which involved contacting the locals and making sure that there was no sign of hostages within walking distance of our battalions. We spent the 25th hashing out the details of Tiger for CAT 4, preparing for CAT 3's upcoming "descent" to Gao, discussing how units will be staggered, and getting ready for the Timbuktu-Araouane raid.

On March 24th, in the middle of the morning, a Transall landed for a few hours visit. Jean-Jacques, my alter ego from the French Air Force, came to visit me to understand the brigade's future needs.

As head of Serval's air component, Jean-Jacques has been leading air operations since the beginning of the operation from his underground CP in Mont Verdun near Lyon. His machines have clocked a lot of flight time. Patrols of fighter bombers have been maintaining air superiority over Mali, and it would often take them hours to get here from Chad, Ivory Coast, or France. He wants to reduce the number of flights, especially since large troop movements and bombardments are rarer since Terz. A new, lighter, more responsive, but less flight-intensive system will take over after this visit. Before he leaves for France, via Gao then Bamako, we share a ration and he gives me the latest news from home. The visit was quick but fruitful. Xavier and I take him back to his plane and entrust him with our letters for our families. In two or three days, they will receive these long-awaited musings, scribbled on the corner of a table or a crate in the room. Night

falls on the camp, I collect my two bottles of well water for a sailor's shower—one every three days—something I look forward to each time!

Malians' gift, mechanic's despair

For the past two days, a Malian cell tower has been installed in the camp. Cell phones can be used again and text messages exchanged with home have broken the isolation of recent weeks. The Malians distributed phone cards to the Tessalit fighters as a token of their appreciation which was in turn appreciated by all. A BBC reporter and other journalists share the small building opposite the CP. We have given them army cots so they do not have to sleep on the concrete floor. I take the time—as I do with every rotation—to meet with them and explain the situation. Naturally, everyone wants to join the units on the front lines, to witness events of interest, to get a feel for and understand the remaining difficulties, and to find out where our hostages might be. These discussions are always relaxed and frank. I simply have to tell them what cannot be mentioned for security reasons, mainly the details of future operations. The rest is open and the activities on these Malian bases offer enough topics to keep our reporters busy, each with their own approach and angle.

In the middle of the morning, Grégoire calls me to tell me about decisions coming down from Paris. The tight timetable and troop withdrawals have been confirmed. We have the impression that decisions are accelerating and there is no time to lose. We need to continue search and reconnaissance operations in the remaining safe havens before we lose the staff we have. The colonels have been warned. Gougeon knows that he will leave his squadron, a LU, and some logisticians so Tessalit can function as a permanent outpost. The other units are to prepare to move south, half through Abeibara to the east by circling north, the other half through the western edge and the entrance to the Assamalmal Valley, which has not yet been reconnoitered by the Chadians. Directions are given. We have to get organized, give orders, refuel, and recover the Crocos Squadron, which has been detached to the paratrooper CAT for almost two months.

This all sounds easy to order, but are these orders feasible? A visit to the armored workshops confirms my fear… Our old X-10RCs and our APCs are on their last legs. Patches that were put on less than two weeks before are starting to peel off. Tires are missing and brake pads, pumps, and belts have not yet arrived. Without these small parts, it will be difficult to leave for new raids that are supposed to cover several hundred miles. By nature, mechanics are often negative in their assessment of the situation, then they'll do whatever it takes, work through the night if they have to, to

get the squadrons back in the game so they can complete their mission. But without parts, the impossible is no longer possible! I listen to a warrant officer who is passionate about his armored vehicles, surrounded by his mechanics. They have already worked miracles and at no time did they let up despite the dire condition of the machines, but without brake pads, resuming operations is compromised. I have always had a deep affection, an admiration for these NCO mechanics and their officers, the latter having usually started out themselves as NCOs. They never make the headlines either. They are not in the front rows of parades. It is always difficult to get them commendations, and yet without them nothing would be possible. A warrant officer explains to me, with arms flailing, that he has no more brake pads. Without men like him, our army would be nothing. I see in him the same candor, the same sense of service as I did in Gouelibo, the chief warrant officer with whom I am still in contact today, the man who took care of my armored vehicles 20 years ago in Germany, in Auvergne, and in Bosnia. If we want to continue, we need some targeted spare parts and we have to make sure we don't have any weak links in the plan.

I relentlessly check and recheck and make sure we are following tactical principles. Experience from other operations has taught me that accidents often happen when the horses leave the stable and when victory seems assured. Setbacks happen when leaders, CPs, and troops are overconfident and when they have lost that hint of suspicion, that intuition that protects them from making the wrong move. The enemy is weakened. They are running from the fight, but they are still able to attack and surprise us. We cannot let our guard down and need to able to withstand whatever they throw at us. With this in mind, I reiterate my opposition to splitting the squadron between Timbuktu and Araouane, despite the pressure to begin this mission. My brigade CP and I believe that the infantry reinforcement should allow it to hold the position, or even react against a new attack, but not to carry out two separate operations. History will prove us right a few days later.

Tuesday, March 26

Operation Tiger begins

It's 3 am, a gentle wind blows across the camp. The companies are busy about the trucks and helicopters. Our plan is to roll into Tessalit by surprise and show our enemy that we will go where we want, when we want, that this land does not belong to terrorists and that if they imagine for one second that they could regain a foothold in these northern regions, valleys, and towns, that they would have to face us again.

At 4 am, I watch as the first wave rolls out for our objectives in the southern part of the town: the town hall, the school, and the road out of town. At the same time, the armored vehicles and trucks race toward the northern entrances into town. Tessalit is a small cosmopolitan town that has been coming back to life for two months. The inhabitants had fled into the desert and returned, reassured by the presence of French soldiers. At 7 am, I head to see Desmeulles by Puma.

From the roof of the town hall, we take a look around before heading over to the primary school "*no more teachers, abandoned books, it's a woeful sight*." Everything is in place in these small classrooms surrounding the playground: desks, wooden chairs, and the last lesson still visible on the blackboard. The children have left the school. When war came and the jihadists occupied the town, the schoolteachers fled south in search of safety. In a small room, we discover piles of school books donated by French associations, most of them still bearing the names of former students from Paris and the surrounding area. One of them lying on the ground in the sand reminds me of my childhood. It is Godier-Moreau's *The Lessons of Things* for fourth graders, by Fernand Nathan, 1956. I open it. I flip through the pages of natural science courses that awakened me to nature: oak trees, acorns, and the forest. All this must seem so foreign to them in Northern Mali, but what a beautiful symbol of solidarity and humanity. I turn to my combat engineer sergeant. We are thinking the same thing: a childhood sacrificed by war and these barbaric terrorists. I had felt this same feeling a few years earlier in the center of Ivory Coast, in the trust zone—a zone that separated the new forces from the pro-Gbagbo forces. In each village I went through, I saw the same thing. War had closed schools and put an end to primary care. We can accept anything from a government or an opposition movement, but not the sacrifice of our youngest, under the pretext of being on the wrong side of the border. In 2006, an old village chief, surrounded by children, showed me the school in a small Ivorian village in the Northern Zone. The school was deserted and abandoned, like in Tessalit. The village had begged me to leave a section to prevent roadway attacks and highway robbers, and the chief had asked me for a clinic and headmaster—security, education, health, and knowledge! The vital needs of any society!

The main street of Tessalit is a reminder of its French past: roundabouts without cars, sturdy buildings still standing along a palm grove, a large gate, a deserted hospital, and a French administrative building on a hill. A few motorbikes are on the road. The NMLA flag is omnipresent. A few armed men watch us go through the city. They are discreet and I refuse

to pick a fight with them. Accompanied by an escort of legionnaires, those of the Ametettai, we walk around the city. The men talk with civilians who remain friendly though at times discreet. We walk past a group playing cards who greet us in passing.

Poverty once again

For two years while at Matignon, I prepared the prime minister's files, particularly on the Sahel. Tessalit and Aguelhok were the centers of gravity for AQIM, the heart of terrorism. I would never have imagined that I would be there one day in the company of paratroopers from the Foreign Legion Para Rgt. Never say never. We come upon a small clinic run by a Malian nurse in a school. He looks after the women and children who are waiting in line outside. After 13 months of silence, the Belgian NGO that supplies him with medicines has resumed contact. He is smiling because he had nothing left but a consultation book and a refrigerator to store vaccines in.

This nurse reminds me of Dr. Farouk, an old Sudanese doctor in charge of the Buzim clinic in the Bihac Pocket in 1994. He treated the Bosnian population and the wounded of the pro-Izetbegovic 505th Brigade. He had no choice and his government had sent him to Yugoslavia as part of the amicable relations between the two countries. He had been there for 20 years, with no real hope of returning home. Our discussions, a few rations, cigarettes, and medicines had temporarily improved his existence. In these martyred countries, there are glimmers of hope: brave, selfless souls who relieve, heal, teach, and save lives. They are often isolated nuns protected by the people or voluntary lay people, all of them admirable for their bravery, in the face of such destitute precariousness. We walk up a parallel street. An old woman is peeling vegetables. She offers me a green tea, smiling with all her teeth. She too must regret the fairly recent time when tourists came to visit the Adrar with their Tuareg guides, in the footsteps of 19th century explorers, at the edge of the desert, far from everything yet in complete safety, as in Timbuktu and Gao. It will take time for peace to return. Time and again, poverty is the root of wars, exploited by an ideology that seeks to exclude and destroy. Sahelian jihadism advocates a return to its roots, but it takes advantage of Toyotas, computers, and satellite phones. In order to extend its power and force its trafficking on entire regions, it destroys without building, imposing a return to the Middle Ages on powerless peoples who suffer the dictates of a few. It keeps people in poverty and prohibits trade, education, and tourism. It pushes young people to emigrate or to hate Westerners, feeding on political disorder and the lack of governance. Communism, our

previous enemy, had a certain vision of society and a project for it. The new barbarians have none, except for a return to *terra incognita*, or the uncharted gray areas of the map, foretold by Jean-Christophe Rufin 20 years ago in his writings about the confrontation of peoples based on religious backgrounds. The post office is devastated, the counter destroyed, and the safe has been pried open. Telegrams from the 1980s strewn about the ground bear witness to a bygone era.

The baker is baking his bread and says hello to us. The butcher is cutting up a goat on the sidewalk. Life is returning to normal. We are accompanied by Ava Djamshidi and Pierre de Poulpiquet, two famous reporters. I return to Tessalit the way I came and am happy to have taken time away from my command post. It has been more than two months since my units crossed Mali from one border to the other. I visited Timbuktu by night and Tessalit by day. The discovery of René Caillié's house and the cup of tea will remain my two memorable Malian delights.

Tiger ends in the afternoon and CAT 4 returns to its base. This was the last operation of this battalion and the G08 FCP. Xavier and his chief of staff know this. It is time to withdraw. In just a few days, the Transall will pick up the sections and companies to bring them back to Abidjan and France, via the decompression stopover in Paphos, Cyprus. We fine tune the synchro matrix as we withdraw to the South.

Before breaking up units and the logistical movements, I have set two meetings at the FCP: a meeting in the evening of all those who have been in command, and a general gathering in the center of the camp the next morning, at 8 am, before it gets too hot, to take a group picture. At 5 pm, Xavier calls to attention and introduces me to the officers and NCOs who were responsible for this victory, the same ones I had made a point of meeting a month earlier, the day before the attack. There were less than a 100 of them, from all branches and specialties, infantrymen, armored vehicles, pilots, artillerymen, combat engineers, airmen, logisticians, and communications.

I shake hands with the always smiling Warrant Officer Stéphane. He will stay in the North with his squadron until they are relieved in early May. The withdrawal will be quick and not all will pass through Gao. I see my young officers and non-commissioned officers, those who fired, pushed their sections to bust open the enemy's strongholds, searched the caves, those who supported the front lines, and the two young officers who kept going back and forth between Gao to feed us and deliver us parts and ammunition on time. As soon as we finish, I see the G08 FCP waiting in

front of the small CP for a gift exchange with Xavier and his team: some paratrooper badges for the Victory of Constantine, a testament to the diversity, the richness, and the similarity of our traditions and our military history. Chicken has done it right again: a collective couscous with all the field rations and an almost cold beer for everyone. The doctors from the field hospital were invited, and I recognize the surgeon N'G. from the Sainte-Anne Hospital in Toulon, two months after our first meeting at the airport in Sévaré. Paratroopers and Africans from the 3rd sing old soldiers' songs. The tone is set by Rémi, whose repertoire never ends. As the African sun sets and the stars come out, we sing together *La Madelon*, *Marie-Dominique*, and *Loin de chez nous* [Far from Home]. A page turns, but the story is not over yet. The Ametettai Dungeon has fallen under the battering by these men, Gao has been cleared and the surrounding wadis have, in part, been searched, but there are still terrorists in the stone and sand deserts of the Niger bend.

Wednesday, March 27

An aerial photo taken of the 2,000 men in the North

It is 6:30 am. The entire camp is gathered on the central strip between the CP and CAT 4, where we paid tribute to our dead. Some emblematic vehicles are positioned in an arc: helicopters, X-10RC armored vehicles, Caesar howitzers, a CP vehicle with its large parabolic antenna, the recovery truck, and, of course, two logistic trucks with two sections of paratroopers sitting on their flatbeds, laughing. Shoulder to shoulder, the 2,000 men of Tessalit squeeze together. The light is still low in the sky and it makes all these green, red, dark blue, and light blue berets worn by the men and women of the Serval Brigade look even more brilliant. Setting up for the photo is quick. The troops are disciplined and everyone willingly lends themselves to this general staging. One of the three air force Pumas takes off with a photographer from the military photo and film institute to take a picture from the sky. My driver brings me my blue and red command flag, the regulatory colors of a combined arms brigade. He holds the flag staff with a questioning look on his face. Only a senior non-commissioned officer can hold this emblem behind his general, and my colors sergeant from the 3rd has already returned to Gao. I need to appoint another. I know several of them and I appreciate them all. Warrant Officer Cristian from the Foreign Legion Para Rgt—my bodyguard in Timbuktu and the intelligence officer in Terz—is the first person that comes to mind. A man that everyone likes. I turn to Desmeulles who suspects my choice. The helicopter takes off, and the warrant officer comes running over as every-

one starts calling out his name and laughing. "*I designate him as colors sergeant. We are equally happy about it.*" The men look up to the sky. I use the loudspeaker to say congratulations: "*For this page of history. They can be proud to belong to the Serval Brigade (applause).*" Xavier is at my side, my loyal deputy commander of the North, along with Laurent, the FCP chief of staff. The three regimental commanders are just behind me, in front of their units gathered facing the Tigharghar, while the helicopter rises to meet the sun. The Puma lands and each unit gathers, taking advantage of the opportunity, to take some souvenir photos of their own. I take my phone out of my pocket and ask Rémi to immortalize this moment with Cristian, proud to hold the staff, as he will do a few minutes later with the G08 FCP in front of the small Malian CP.

The last safe havens

The decisions of the last small council are broken down into successive withdrawal orders. The Chief of Staff of the Armies will be arriving in Gao the next day. So I decide to make a round-trip to welcome him and take the opportunity to coordinate with Denis and the main CP on the synchro matrix. Xavier is preparing to launch the last operations of CAT 3 before I return in 48 hours. A small liaison plane takes off at 5 am. It will return in the evening with the long-awaited brake pads and some of the missing parts.

I am back in Gao three weeks after Chief Brigadier Pingaud's farewell. The helicopters are lined up along with the AIFVs. Denis comes to welcome me, a bottle of water in hand. We spend the day with Claude reviewing developments and studying the feasibility of future operations in light of pending withdrawals and enemy threats. In these times of logistical complexity, we run the risk of concentrating too much on our own organization and forget that the enemy is still out there, waiting to strike. We need to properly balance our efforts on intelligence—to be warned of impending attacks—and other work that needs to be done by the CP. Disengagement is going to happen very quickly and the next mission will be very different from our current one. The Serval Brigade will be reduced to a single CAT and tasked with assisting UN contingents, mainly African, who are gradually moving northwards to occupy the terrain alongside Senior Colonel Dacko's Malian battalions, and the military contingents that will be part of the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) near Bamako. All this is quite clear and the telephone exchanges with Grégoire confirm this trend. We are moving forward in this direction while ensuring that we have sufficient capacity to complete our searches of the Niger bend. My chief of intel updates me with the information we have

on the area. Leveraging locals who are hostile to the terrorists and our own means of observation, we have identified two zones that are still active and dangerous: to the west, the quadrilateral made up of Faguibine, Timbuktu, Ber, and Araouane, where the militants seem to have returned; to the east, the area around Anefis, Bourem, and Almoustarat. In both areas, the enemy has been thrown off balance by the fighting. Contraband traffickers are reorganizing to try to re-establish their networks. The terrorists, who are often at the origin of this trafficking, take advantage of the situation to impose themselves as the new overlords in this ancestral game of might makes right. I connect with my Africans, who are still here. Denis has allowed them to wear a T-shirt in the CP's overheated hangar. The thermometer no longer moves up or down. It reads 115° F from morning to evening.

During the situation update at 7 pm, I meet with all my cell leaders, the entire CP, almost a hundred people. Some are almost begrudging me for having left them for the North. Here too, we fought and had to close ranks. The edge of the runway was hit by 122 mm rockets several times, but fortunately none of them landed on the inhabited area. Without them, the G08 FCP would have been blind and quickly run out of food, water, and logistics. The main CP supported the FCP while conducting its own operations. It will soon be alone again to continue ground operations.

Thursday, March 28

The sniper was only doing his duty

Accompanied by his two Malian and Nigerien counterparts, the CSAS made a quick visit to Gao, time enough to get an update on the situation, to inspect one of CAT 2's sections in front of their AIFVs, and to speak to a delegation of soldiers under the tents in the living quarters. The section of Gauls is lined up in two rows, impeccable, weapons in hand. They are commanded by a strong warrant officer who has come under fire several times during the Doro operations. They don't look the same as they did in Clermont-Ferrand. As I look at them, I see the invisible cohesion of my Gauls back in Bihac. The smallest on the right holds his sniper rifle by the barrel, its butt resting on the ground. He is young like his 20 year-old peers and yet he looks terribly determined. The admiral asks him if he has shot any terrorists with his rifle, and he answers that he has not. The answer doesn't seem right, based on what I know about this section and what I can see in this soldier. I go back to him, alone, to question him. No, he didn't shoot any of them with his sniper rifle, they were too close and they were storming his group, but he did shoot two of them with his automatic pistol, just a few yards away. It was them or me!

This infantryman looked me in the eyes and answered simply and respectfully. It is thanks to men like him that our army was victorious under the orders of the Emperor, that it stood firm on the Marne, and faced down Verdun. This soldier, whose name I have forgotten, symbolized that morning the eternal infantry, our victories, and our sorrows.

I spend the afternoon at the CP studying the synchro matrix again with my staff officers and making plans to resume operations once CAT 3 has reached Gao. In the meantime, the infantry reinforcement in Timbuktu needs to remain in place and take advantage of the paratroopers' withdrawal from Tessalit to protect the airport, until the Burkinabés arrive. This is the only way to release the squadron so it can head to Araouane. I intend to go back to the North to make sure that the armored vehicles on both sides of the Adrar, in liaison with the Chadians, make it back to Gao safely, and leave Xavier in charge. He will organize the companies' withdrawal, leaving the LU and the Roosters' armored squadron on site, ready to conduct raids and intercept enemy pickups that try to use the Trans-Saharan.

Things are falling into place, but for the time being, we still have to hold Timbuktu, Tessalit, Gao, and Kidal on our own, which requires four companies. The directives run counter to the reality on the ground. Tomorrow, I will head back to the North, but I feel that I belong here again, where the brigade is most active. At the edge of this paved runway, the heat is overwhelming. I do enjoy one creature comfort: a real shower and a little salad with the ration make me feel like I left the outposts for the main camp, like I left Langson for Hanoi, as we say with a smile! And yet, apart from these two details, life is still very rustic around the airstrip: fruits and vegetables are almost non-existent. The water from the showers comes from the Niger River, which is particularly polluted during the drought season. The combat engineers are forced to heavily chlorinate it to avoid epidemics, which irritates the skin. The oh-so-popular field shower facilities are always at the limit of saturation, and the heat does not improve hygiene one bit. In this regard, the infrastructure in Tessalit is more suitable with its buildings and toilets.

Friday, March 29

Movement, surprise, open spaces

Denis and I settle on a 48-hour trip. I take advantage of this morning to follow up some HR work with my chief of staff: the summer rotations of the brigade's officers and non-commissioned officers. With a few exceptions, which will require some lobbying, the transfer orders are in line with the wishes of the individuals in question. Here again, this is about

families who are waiting and need to move, children who will be changing schools, wives and girlfriends who will have to resettle quickly on bases where they are not always expected! Following up on these changes is essential to make sure they correspond to the professional, personal, and family aspirations of subordinates.

Rémi and I leave by plane for Tessalit, two hours of what ends up being a very turbulent flight. We admire, from above, the southern foothills of the Adrar and the Trans-Saharan winding through the desert. I see a column of vehicles coming out of Aguelhok and heading south, half of CAT 3 heading toward the western entrance of Assamalmal, followed by logistic vehicles that will continue directly toward Gao. This campaign was characterized by movement, surprise, wide open spaces, and leaders taking full responsibility for their command at all levels, from general to young sergeant. At the same time, Gougeon and his armored vehicles are bypassing the massif, 100 miles further north, to race toward Abeibara.

The Tigharghar Massif is below us in full light, and we have searched these valleys, emptied the depots, and destroyed or dislodged its enemy combatants. What a contrast with the flight on the night of February 24th and the liaison with the Chadians who were badly hit during the first fighting! The little Victory of Constantine guided us while tactics, support, new equipment, readiness, and our troops' courage did the rest.

Xavier welcomes me on the runway. The camp is nearly deserted again. My mechanic warrant officer spent the night reassembling brake pads and spare parts so the armored vehicles could leave the station. All that's left is the CP, the forward surgical team, and some paratroopers waiting to be called back to their base. "*People are thinking about returning home. The main force has left the area and the camp. It's strangely quiet. A page is turning. We must remain vigilant. It is during transitions like these that a force is most vulnerable. When it is less riveted by the enemy and the danger.*"

With Xavier and the FCP's TOC, we follow the arrows on the maps, the reports of the Africans from the 1st Mar Inf Rgt and their Bisons from the 126th: to the west Operation Panther 8, to the east Operation Fox. When the two will have crossed Anefis, the center of gravity will have definitively moved south. In the meantime, we have to continue coordinating with our Chadian allies. They left the Aguelhok bivouac area a few days ago to settle in the Kidal camp. From there, we are counting on them to link up with us in Abeibara and intercept terrorists seeking to avoid CAT 3 coming from the north. I send them a new message to that

effect, passing through our LU which is always at their side. I will meet General Bikimo in Abeibara the next day, a meeting of the two generals halfway between Bouguessa and Kidal. The Chadian contingent is still recovering from its last operations, but they confirm to me that this operation will indeed be Franco-Chadian.

Saturday, March 30

Armored raid on the eastern foothills of the Tigharghar

It was a terrible night. Xavier was up several times. Trucks were going back and forth between the camp and the airstrip to transport people on their way out. The first Transall takes off at 6 am, before the heat, so it can carry more weight. I walk around the camp, past the buildings and the guns taken from the jihadists in the Ametettai, lying at the foot of the flagpole like old sleeping trophies.

The wind sweeps across the tarmac. Our flag is flying over Tessalit. In the middle of the morning, the pilot lands with Denis and three officers from the 3rd. I had promised to show them the Northern Camp before withdrawing when the opportunity presented itself. Xavier takes them on a tour of the place, like an old butler with a cheeky bit of humor!

The three brigade leaders are brought together for a photo against a backdrop of a parachute, yellowed walls, and three flags attached to a radio antenna above the CP. In the early afternoon, I leave the camp by Puma for Abeibara where Gougeon has just arrived. I have a meeting with Bikimo and the local authority. The helicopter is escorted by a more than dissuasive Tiger. Nonetheless, we fly at very low altitudes to surprise potential observers. East of the Adrar, the terrain is very open and suitable for herds of camels and goats. We fly over camps and isolated tents. The Tiger observes the few vehicles on the Kidal-Bouguessa road leading to Algeria, a wide road where trade continues. The meeting takes place in a building under construction on the outskirts of the town. The reunion with the Chadians goes well, but the meeting with the commandant of the region is rather banal. The man wears a turban that hides a toothless mouth and a long gash along his cheek. His gaze is fleeting. The area is not completely cleared. The next day, a couple miles away, while crossing Abeibara, CAT 3 will intercept a dazed, half-deaf African. He will present himself as an Al-Qaeda veteran freed of his contract, free to return to his country as his leaders have been killed or routed. A lost fighter, abandoned, no longer paid, and sacrificed. This French-speaking African reveals the ravages of smuggling and jihadist propaganda.

Bikimo tells me that his move to Kidal does not suit him. The camp lacks water and his troops are not satisfied with the rationing and missing the shady gardens of Aguelhok. I promise to visit him soon in Kidal and offer him the possibility of putting a large part of the Tessalit camp at his disposal, a place he knows well and appreciates. This spatial redistribution is to be studied with the CP in Bamako which is working hard with our African allies and the UN to distribute the future sites of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the Chadian armed forces intervening in Mali (CAFIM), and the Malian armed forces. The armored platoons are parked in a star formation around the building. In a few moments, they will return to the South, toward Anefis and Gao. The Chadians leave for Kidal, searching the bivouac areas they encounter along the way. Everyone is thinking about the hostages, everyone is hoping to find the needles in the haystack.

The evening is quiet. The TOC follows the two ongoing raids and the "outbound" rotation schedules for Gao and Bamako. I will say goodbye in a few hours, after I meet with a UN delegation, and after having saluted the remaining units.

Sunday, March 31

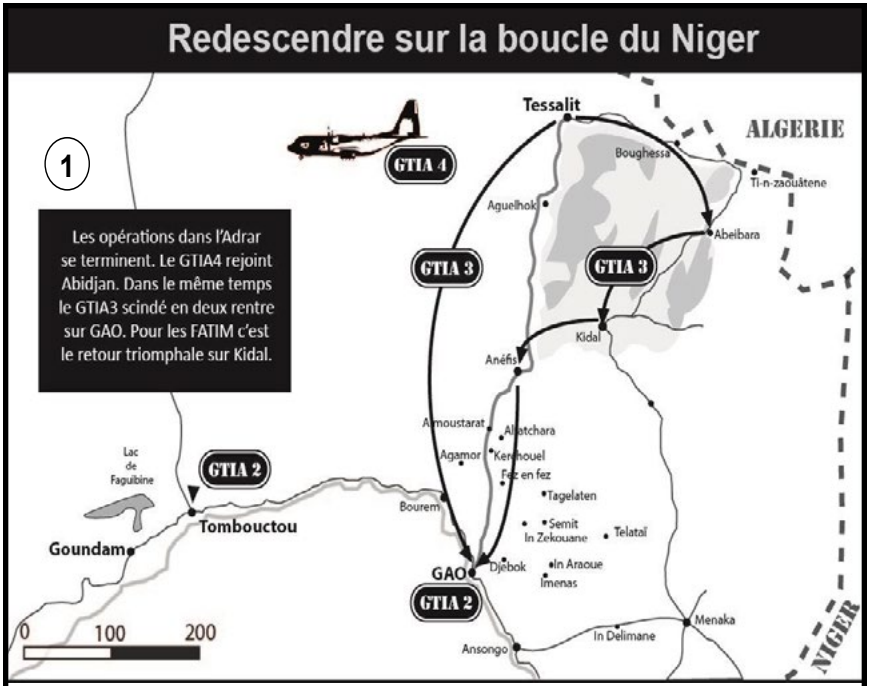
Terrorist attack in Timbuktu

Last quiet night in this small room with Xavier and Laurent. Denis calls me to tell me that terrorists infiltrated Timbuktu again during the night. The squadron and the Gauls support the Malians to destroy them.

An American official and a Moroccan colonel, representing the UN, have just landed for a brief mission. Escorted by part of the squadron, I take the time to show them around the camp, to accompany them to Tessalit, and to see the abandoned clinic and school. The children play in the streets between armed NMLA pickups which have appeared in recent days. The visit is quick and sufficient to see that the locals have returned and that the environment offers enough facilities to install military and civilian units, mindful about water that will need to be drawn from the wells that come from the same water table as the one that supplies the city.

On the way back, Denis tells me about the attack in Timbuktu. An officer was shot in the arm. The units are still fighting. They have suitable weapons and optics. The center of gravity has shifted to the Niger bend, the next step.

The UN delegation has left. The Rooster Squadron is gathered in front of the CP. I wanted to meet with them before I left. In a few minutes,



1. Operations in Adrar are reaching their end. GTIA4 goes back to Abidjan. Meanwhile, GTIA3, proceeds back to Gao in two elements. For the FATIM, it's a triumphant return to Kidal. After Aguelhok and Kidal, FATIM will settle in Tessalit at the beginning of May.

Figure 13. Go Back South to the Niger Loop. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

I explain to them the force's future maneuver, the withdrawal between April and June, and the keys to our success: combined arms combat, joint operations, and the desire for victory which pushed the different units to work together. I will say these things to all the companies, batteries, and squadrons before they leave Gao the following month. Before taking off, I take the time to meet with the nurses and doctors from the forward surgical team, in the two air-conditioned tents where dozens of wounded French and Chadians and the child soldiers from the Adrar have spent time. Without them, other French soldiers would have joined Harold, Cédric, Wilfried, and Alexandre in afterlife of heroes. They too have done our country a great service.

As for Desmeulles, he is patiently waiting for his turn to disengage. His CP is at rest, the weapons taken from the enemy are lined up against the wall of his small building. Some of them will be returned to the Malians, others will be displayed in the regimental museum in Calvi. Final-

ly, I salute the logisticians near their trucks and the helicopter mechanic pilots from the HU's 5th Cmb Hel Rgt, a few yards from their Gazelles and Tigers. Not a single chopper has crashed, no fatal breakdown plunged the brigade into mourning, a faultless performance under extremely harsh conditions, the fruit of demanding professionalism and experience from Afghanistan and Libya.

Xavier and the TOC have left the CP. My things fit in a backpack and a satchel. Wearing our helmets and bulletproof vests, which is standard for any excursion, we head to the Puma with Marie-Jo and Rémi, so it can take us back to Gao and the main CP. A final salute to the G08 FCP paratroopers and a cloud of dust envelops us, time to take off and head south at an altitude of over 2,000 feet. We watch as the Tigharghar passes us on the left, the Timetrine on the right. Down below, it's still over 105° F, but for the next two hours we enjoy the ambient 80° F in the chopper as if it were a parting gift. No one speaks, the doors are open. The landscape is magnificent from above. You never get tired of these open spaces. I take my notebook out of my satchel and dive back into these six weeks of operational and human adventures by flipping through the pages I have written so far.

We land at 8 pm. It's dark. At the foot of the tower, on the small terrace, the bodyguards have set up a table for my return and the welcome of Bishop Ravel, Bishop of the Armies. He has just met with the CATs and the two chaplains who spend their time between Bamako and our four bases. We dine together with representatives from the units. The exchanges are frank, very cordial, and constructive. The bishop is a people person, smiling, and of rare intelligence. He knows what it means to be in the field and is humble.

In Timbuktu, the chief corporal saves his lieutenant who was shot

Before going back to my canvas cot, I go to the CP to get a complete update on the day's fighting.

The terrorists infiltrated the city in small groups, targeting the Malian barracks and the palace of the governor, who has just arrived from Bamako. The kamikaze vehicle was detected in time by the Malian checkpoint at the western entrance to the town and destroyed by machine gun fire.

Since early morning, enemy combatants and suicide bombers have tried to inflict losses on the Malians. At the head of part of his squadron and a section of Gauls, the captain protected the governor and assisted the Malians. The Malian commander was chased by a suicide bomber near the barracks and his life was saved thanks to the return fire from one of his shooters. Lieutenant Amaury, on his way back to the city center with his

platoon of Porpoises, was intercepted by three terrorists who reacted quite astonishingly. The three men moved toward the armored vehicle, without haste or fear, and fired at it at close range. With both arms wounded, the lieutenant could not retaliate. His loyal corporal grabbed his machine gun and fired at the first two, who continued to approach, despite the shots. Two of them fell to the ground a few yards away, one of whom detonated his explosive belt. Luckily, the suicide bomber triggered his explosive charge too late, just as he was falling. The hundreds of steel balls were projected toward the ground, preventing the Porpoises from being hit.

The engagement lasted only a few seconds. The shooter is covered in blood, both his lieutenant's and that of the terrorists. The third terrorist managed to escape into an alley. Furious locals hunted down two surviving terrorists who were trying to get out of the city. The attack was a failure. The governor was unharmed, and the losses were substantial (several killed) for an enemy that had only managed to wound a few soldiers. On our side, the lieutenant was evacuated to the field hospital in Gao, where he was immediately operated on. I go to see him at 10 pm in the OR, and he is awake. He feels OK. The surgeon confirms to me that he will make it through and that his thick, muscular arms helped stave off the worst. I will have the pleasure of decorating him in front of his regiment in Angoulême four months later! The meeting is brief. He needs to sleep and will be repatriated the next day to Bamako and then Paris.

The additional infantry deployed just in time avoided unnecessary casualties, but the two sections are not enough to launch Operation Adada on Araouane. At the same time the fighting ended, about a 100 legionnaires were transported from Tessalit by three Transalls for a week of reinforced guard duty. The articulation of operations and withdrawals is complex and tense, but it is working!

At the same time that CAT 4 is leaving the area, CAT 3's armored vehicles and infantrymen are continuing their search operations. They find tons of ammunition, mines, medical supplies, and a printing press in the Assamalmal Valley. The return to Gao is imminent for both columns. No respite for the brigade. We must remain vigilant until the end.

Monday, April 1

He blames himself for leaving his men

For several days now, an old tendinitis in my heels has been acting up because of the heat. It will soon be followed by tendinitis in my shoulders, both of them working together to prevent me from getting a good night's

sleep. This tendinitis starts indiscriminately spreading through the camp, sparing no ranks, just like the stomach flu and kidney pains for some.

At dawn, I accompany the bishop to the field hospital. The lieutenant is lying on his stretcher, smiling. He blames himself for abandoning his men before the end of the mission, the normal reaction of a wounded man pulled from a unit under fire. We reminisce about the past: my first visit to Angoulême, the welcome I received from the lieutenants of the 1st, rappelling down the town hall tower, and the funny gift from the young officers—a pair of slippers. He was the one who gave them to me, and we laughed about it. We are a long way from that, but young officers are the leaders of tomorrow and these memories are markers of cohesion and shared trust. Both of his forearms are fractured. They are held in place alongside his body to prevent the pins and splints from moving. This officer will soon be with his wife and daughter. When I mention this, his face lights up. I pat him on the shoulder and take my leave. He escaped the worst, saved by his corporal. This African is one of mine and I am proud of him. It's time to go to the CP. The bishop and the lieutenant took off together, the former having taken the mail from the bodyguards and the general. The bishop will post it the next day in Paris, while the lieutenant will be in a Parisian military hospital in good hands, along with other wounded soldiers from the brigade and veterans from Afghanistan who are still hospitalized.

The terrorists have not given up attacking. They are back in Timbuktu with the intention of inflicting casualties on us and challenging our successes through the media fallout that an attack on this symbolic city will generate. We must react quickly. The squadron is still needed along with its reinforcements of infantrymen from the 92nd Inf Rgt. Porpoises and Gauls are neck and neck with their Malian counterparts. Half a dozen terrorists have entrenched themselves in a sturdy building, safe from Malian weapons. They are isolated, locals have fled the area, but they still let us know about any suspicious movements. Rockets and anti-tank missiles are fired at short range, doubled by bursts of machine gun fire. The fighting takes place in the middle of the day, the bodies of suicide bombers are found at the scene, to the great satisfaction of the local population.

At the same time, we learn that Operation Fox and Operation Panther 8 are over. Gougeon is crossing the Anefis Desert with his armored vehicles. His chief of operations has just finished destroying the ammunition and equipment found in the Assamalmal Valley. He too is heading south through Anefis and Almoustarat and on to Gao. They expect to reach Almoustarat tonight and Gao tomorrow.

Everything is accelerating on the withdrawal front. Parisian decisions are becoming clearer. The idea is to reduce our presence to a 1,200-strong CAT, which means withdrawing another 1,500 troops by next month. In concrete terms, this means that we have to carry out a major logistical operation to ensure the almost continuous flow of withdrawn units.

Their designation is the subject of lengthy discussions with Paris and Bamako. At the same time, we need to follow up at the central level, check on planes and boats programmed to withdraw men and equipment, and anticipate several hundreds of miles of transport toward Niger and Senegal. The headache of withdrawing forces is a natural consequence of the emergency deployment less than three months earlier.

The main CP has taken over the brigade's entire area of action. The small logistics team monitors the forces returning from Tessalit and anticipates the outgoing movements from Gao. In an emergency, they set up reintegration and storage areas and provided for supplies to enable large-scale movement of units toward the west, and air transits on the runway toward Bamako. The small air force team is more focused on managing the transporters, our good old Transalls, than on dropping laser-guided bombs on the wadis. And yet, half of the staff's brain, comparable to a beehive, is focused on continuing operations against AQIM and MUJWA. The scheduled withdrawals and base guard duty diminish our capacity to act as the days pass. With Denis and Claude, we are once again looking at the map and the forecasts. Clearly, after CAT 4 has left and soon CAT 3, our operations will be reduced to a minimum. We therefore have two weeks of possible operations left, three at best, if our allies come to relieve us in Timbuktu, Tessalit, and Kidal. We urge them to speed up the arrival of the Burkinabés in Timbuktu and the MINUSMA troops in the North. The race against the clock continues. We have been racing non-stop since January.

Part 5

All the way, everywhere, no letting up

April 2-May 17

Clearing out the terrorists' supplies, final operations, and the return home

1. Operation Adada.
2. Operation Farada.
3. Operations Wasso and Amattetai.
4. Operation Esseli.
5. Operation Gustav. 6–10 April.
6. Operations Garigliano–Akello
   Operations:
   Garigliano. 11–13 April.
   Obiou. 15–19 April.
   Akello. 25 April–2 May.

Figure 14. April-May—Empty the Holds of the Terrorists. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

This operation will be called Gustav!

It's April 1st. To complete the searches and assert our presence throughout the inhabited part of the country, we still have two areas to explore, each 300 miles apart: the region of Almoustarat and In Aïs, north of Gao, and the area around Timbuktu, Ber, Faguibine, and Araouane. The first will be entrusted to the squadron, the second to the

rest of CAT 2. CAT 3 is preparing to withdraw while protecting Gao in case we get hit there again. The officer in charge of the operation suggests a name for In Aïs, an unpronounceable and even less memorable wadi name. We have to keep it simple. In response, I offer up the name "Gustav" for this search mission. This name will spill a lot of ink and raise several eyebrows, including, it seems, those of the Scandinavians who apparently denied any involvement in this operation. As general of the 3rd Brigade, this name refers to two completely different stories, as revealed by Patrick Forestier in an article in *Paris Match*. For people who like to laugh and love movies, Chief Warrant Officer Gustav is General Sponz's fat cat in *Gramps is in the Resistance.* Since I could not decently give this explanation to Paris, which was already more than surprised by the name, I had to tell them that this name had been chosen in memory of the battles of the 3rd in Italy and of the "Gustav" line's breakthrough near Monte Cassino in May 1944 by the Africans. A fussy officer thought to pass judgment on this historic christening. I made a point of calling him to point out that the next line, which had also been broken by General de Monsabert's troops, was none other than the "Adolf Hitler" line, and that I reserved the right to choose the names of my own operations. This nipped the criticism, but I took care to name the following operation "Garigliano," another name of a victory, albeit less provocative but just as historic. My own cat Gustav never knew that a major operation bore his name 3,000 miles from Auvergne…

This bit of humor warmed the heart of my CP, which only had one regret, that of not being able to watch *Gramps is in the Resistance* and *Crooks in Clover*—two films whose tirades were often quoted in the tents—while we were in Mali.

The fighting is not yet over in the center of Timbuktu. CAT 3 has not yet reached Gao, but we are planning Adada and Gustav for the next few days, starting the next day for Araouane, and five days later for In Aïs. The company of legionnaires can only stay a few days in Timbuktu before heading back to Abidjan. Although Bamako wants an immediate departure for Araouane, I decide to give the squadron another 24 hours to recover from its series of skirmishes and prepare its convoy of light vehicles. Faced with the insistence of an external opinion, unaware of the constraints of ground combat and of the pressure exerted on this isolated and regularly attacked unit, I had to intervene to explain that this decision of command and common sense was non-negotiable.

The room is full for the evening update. Each cell reports on its findings and the elements that will influence the future maneuver. The chief

of staff has noted them all and is constantly reorienting the FRAGOs to maintain the pace and fulfill the missions, without ending in stalemate or taking excessive risks. The briefing ends with the projection of a slide show, suited to April Fools', put together by one of our more comedic officers. It retraces the progress of operations and the brigade as seen by our adversaries. Everyone gets poked fun at. Well-targeted downtime is rare, but indispensable between two periods of tension, and this slideshow couldn't have come at a better time.

Tuesday, April 2

CAT 3's return to Gao

The brigade's center of gravity has definitely returned to Gao. Gougeon arrived in the night with his armored vehicles. The second column will be here soon. At 6 am, I walk around the bivouac area, spread out over several hundred yards alongside the airstrip. The sanitary conditions are not good enough to accommodate an additional CAT. Water distribution points and electrical outlets are missing where the squadron and units from Tessalit are supposed to settle. The Gauls are on guard around the airfield or have already left on foot and vehicle patrols, in and around Gao. The AIFVs regularly scour the region to gather intelligence and prevent infiltration attempts. Few infantrymen are resting in tents. I am pleased to see Gougeon and his CP again. He rightly called his CAT "the nomadic column." For more than two months, since Niamey, his units have been maneuvering in the pure tradition of armored units, at the brigade's outposts. In the west, Adada has begun. As agreed, the squadron left Timbuktu for Araouane with a reinforcement of combat engineers and a logistical detachment, mainly fuel tankers to supply a helicopter refueling pad at the halfway point. The first few miles are hard. The heavy vehicles repeatedly get stuck in the sand, but the column advances north between the dunes. We follow its progress on the large map in the TOC. The Tigers are on alert in Gao, ready to take off.

What badge will this brigade wear?

At the end of the afternoon, Rémi and Nadia, my communications officer, present me with some drafts for a badge. Our mission will soon be coming to an end, and we want to come up with a unifying badge to symbolize it. The ideas are coming in and a competition is started. In a few days, we will have the final design, representative of the Serval Brigade, its engagement area, and its units. The final design will consist of a map of Mali, the badge of the 3rd—the three tricolor crescents and the Victory of Constantine—with the eagle of the 11th AB to her right and the insignia

of the army helicopters to her left, all of which will be surrounded by a silver circle engraved with the anchor of the marines and the grenade of the Foreign Legion. Each symbol will pay tribute to those who were part of the mission. It is the beginning of April, the brigade has been named Serval after the operation and even though it is not over, it is synonymous with victory for everyone. We therefore naturally decide to add "Serval Brigade" to the silver circle and the motto of the 3rd, which was inherited by the Serval Brigade, its legitimate offspring: "Only one goal: victory." More than 4,000 numbered copies are ordered and made in France. Each soldier from the brigade will be given one later, and everyone will wear them on the Champs-Élysées on the 14th of July.

I am back to the 3rd's CP in the overheated hangar: Chief Brigadier Dany, an artilleryman from Africa for more than 20 years, a loyal soldier, beside him the old captains near their radios and telephones, the intelligence specialists isolated in a small glass room, constantly studying the data from their sensors, aerial photos, conventional reports, and wire taps. Their leader provides regular summaries. He directs his sensors and requests to upper echelons. A lot of women are on his staff, all of whom are extremely efficient and available when needed. Despite the omnipresent heat and sand, the communications staff ensures that our computer servers and all the laptops are working properly. The brigade CP is the heart of our tactical command system. It adapts to the environment, the multinational or national framework of missions, and distances, but at its core is a precious tool made up of innovative techniques, technologies, operational experience (Balkans, Afghanistan, and Africa), and talent. Once again, this delicate system is only held together by the quality of the people running it and by the spirit instilled by their leaders, particularly the chief of staff.

These women and men have their own experience, their past, and their pride. The chief warrant officer who dispatches messages and emails is a Catalan. He pinned a silhouette of a donkey above his computer. The chief corporal he works with is from the northern neighborhoods of Marseilles. The three of us share the same distant origins, and we often joke about the cosmopolitan side of the Phocaean city, the Good Mother and the old port, the beauty of the Canigou and the Vallespir. All these simple pleasures and jokes are nothing more than the signs of mutual affection that unite completely different people who have decided to accomplish together what no civilian job could offer them with the same level of intensity, risk, and selflessness.

Wednesday, April 3

Rockets fired at Gao

We are awakened at 4:30 am by sirens. 122 mm rockets were fired at the airport but missed it.

Grégoire visits Gao, giving us a chance to talk about the near future and him a chance to meet some of the journalists who are still here. The disengagement of the units is becoming clearer, but those at the CPs in Bamako and Gao have not yet been decided. North of Timbuktu, the news from the squadron is encouraging. It is halfway there and the drivers are getting a better feel for driving on sand.

Thursday, April 4

Lieutenant, the best officer rank

I wake up early today and head to the CP to check in with the staff on night duty. The temperature is still bearable, and it's the best time to respond to emails. At 6:15 am, the camp's lieutenants, about 40 of them, suddenly appear in the CP. They come looking for me to share a cup of coffee under the tents a few hundred yards away. Their president, with good-natured insolence, offers me a huge onion before making me stand up on a logistics truck, a little joke in memory of the Tessalit taxis. We have a good time together. More than 25 years of career separate us. The sand of Gao is the opposite of the snows of Germany, the jihadists are light years away from the armored divisions of the Warsaw Pact, but the basic training, the requirements of command, and the will to defend our country remain unchanged and true to form. Most of them come from our regiments from the 3rd. I know them from having been around them and followed them during firing practice or combat exercises over the last few months. Some had only been in their regiment for a few months and yet they took their men to battle without hesitation and with precision. Our schools have trained them well, and their veterans have faith in them.

As soon as I get back to the hangar, I discover Xavier and a good part of the G08 FCP in transit for a few minutes before leaving for Abidjan. The news quickly made the rounds of the CP. Staff officers head over to the boarding zone to meet their counterparts from the Northern CP in front of the Transall.

Out in the field, the raid on Araouane was carried out on time. The unit is 6 miles to the south. The midway landing pad will allow the Gazelle to continue to the village. The rest of the area is quiet. I decide to join them at the end of the night.

Friday, April 5

The solitude of Arabs deep in the desert

It's 2:30 am. I take off in a Puma with a bodyguard and fly to Timbuktu and Araouane. The flight was planned to transport spare parts and two mechanics to the intermediate pad, where a Gazelle has broken down. I had 140 beers and soda cans loaded for the squadron, one per man. It is not much, but they will be appreciated in the middle of nowhere, coming from the sky, these beers that I could not offer to the liberators of Timbuktu in January.

After two hours of flight, we refuel on the runway of Timbuktu, then set out again toward the north where the Porpoises, Bisons, combat engineers, and nurses of the column await us. The light armored vehicles—the APCs—are spread out in a star formation around the CP where I am greeted by Lieutenant-Colonel Arnaud, second-in-command of CAT 2, and Captain Aurélien, who held Timbuktu for more than two months. Next to them, I see a smiling Captain Lucile. She commands the support company of combat engineers from Castelsarrasin who specialize in mine clearance. A solid officer, respected by all, she too is experiencing one of the greatest moments of her life. We share a coffee before leaving, talking about the fights from the day before.

The medical captain gives me a lucid description of the blind and suicidal determination of the attackers. He is convinced that the jihadists are taking drugs before going into battle. He shows me a vial of a brown product brought in by one of the locals. He is convinced that it is ketamine, which has the dual advantage, in these circumstances, of inhibiting fear and anesthetizing the pain of injuries. The ketamine is believed to have come from Libya. The abnormal attitude of the Timbuktu attackers confirms his hypothesis. Some accounts from the paratroopers in the Ametettai also back up this assumption. As I listen to him, I think of the packets of syringes found around the abandoned hospital in Tessalit, which gets me thinking that this practice is probably not limited to the Timbuktu region alone. These are the methods of jihadists, who prey on the naivety and faith of those they sacrifice, or, according to the Malians, who force them by blackmailing their loved ones or by compensating poverty-stricken families. Life matters little to them. The veterans of Afghanistan know this. They too have suffered suicide attacks, not on this scale, but with the same violence and trauma.

A village in the dunes

The column has left. In less than an hour, after crossing several dunes, it will arrive at the gates of Araouane, a small village built on high ground

in the middle of the desert. The wind has picked up, and we reach the first circular concrete wells that go deep into the water table. Herds of camels are at the trough drinking. Around 30 men, dressed in blue and green, are busy making them drink while draft animals pull ropes for several yards allowing the water bags to fill up and then empty.

The inhabitants are intrigued by the arrival of these armored vehicles. A French-Arabic NCO interpreter explains to them why we have come. Our troops are welcomed by them, and we see locals coming down in small droves. This attraction breaks the monotony of everyday life. I let the captain carry out his mission, stepping aside to observe and chat with a few cheerful children, who make an effort to speak French. They no longer have a teacher and take care of the herds with the adults. It will take time to restore confidence and the salt trade. In this village, others will tell me that they were driven out of Timbuktu because of their ethnic origins. These inhabitants are not Tuaregs, but Arabs. For centuries, they have traveled the vast expanses of desert to trade between the North and the South. You only have to look at a map to see that Araouane is halfway between the Niger River, which is populated, and the salt mines of Taoudenit in the far north, near the border with Mauritania. Here too, René Caillié passed by on his way out of Timbuktu. At the time, the village was much larger. The long discussions the captain had with Araouane's men in the small abandoned school gave him all the details of this trade, which is now a thing of the past. The Arabs have only one wish, to resume the salt trade on camels, three days to get to Taoudenit, three days to reach Timbuktu, where most of them had a second home. The war has come this way and mistrust has set in. The Malians in the South accuse the Arabs of having made a pact with the terrorists and, little by little, they are driving them out of the Niger bend, depriving them of their trade. In this case, everyone loses and it will take time to restore confidence and allow these children to return to a normal life.

The discussions continue. The wind blows hard, rushing in between the small, low, shuttered houses. The medical APC was placed in front of the school, allowing families to consult a doctor. The column forms behind the vehicle, disciplined and silent. Free military aid is a reflex of our units engaged in operations. It is limited only by the availability of our medical supplies, which are primarily intended for units. This is a French tradition: when our units are deployed, we also offer medical assistance to relieve the suffering of populations that are caught in the crosshairs of war. Serving and helping others is always rewarding in its own right, but it breaks the hearts of our doctors who cannot provide follow-up care and

who are often limited to emergency, family, and pediatric medicine, and don't have the appropriate medicine.

This practice also gives units the opportunity to integrate into their local environment. This line of veiled women holding their children in their arms or by their hands reminds me of the medical consultations in Abéché in eastern Chad, those in Man in Ivory Coast, or those in Bosnia. This support is not intended to replace local and international structures, or even NGOs, which often fill gaps effectively. It provides punctual relief and takes stock of the situation.

The herds of camels mix with the armored vehicles on the edge of the village. On the high point, two old walls still stand. A group of Malians, armed with Kalashnikovs, are sitting in a pickup and watching the area. I join them, we are next to the remains of the French fort of Araouane. This outpost is more than a century old and dates from the time when the Sahara was held by the Méhariste troops and trafficking was kept in check. These men had to have a strong spirit and a deep calling to live months or even years between these dunes, lost in time. The government's ambitions were long-term. Teachers, engineers, technicians, and administrators followed the caravans and exposed them to European civilization. The architecture of this country and the existing administration still bears the mark of this legacy, of this imprint. Looking at these old walls, I remember the governor of Ouaddai explaining to me, nine years earlier, the organization of his territorial administration, how children were educated using the French model, patiently instructed by brave Chadian teachers. History is never far away in Africa. Even if people have legitimately gained their independence, they still remember the landmarks and memories of a once strong authority, synonymous with security.

The meeting ends. Handshakes and salutes follow the talks. My bodyguard approaches me. A Puma landed a few moments ago. I have allowed journalists from the major news networks to use it so they could report on this desert raid. I see well-known faces: Olivier Santicchi and Thomas Fessy from the BBC. The squadron gathers at the entrance of the village near the wells. It's time to head back to Timbuktu and Gao. My Porpoises have opened a few beers. They are smiling. Others put them in wet socks, hanging from the rear-view mirrors. This raid made its mark on them, after two months of staying put. The Puma heads south again. We fly over the helicopter pad. The Gazelle has been repaired and the platoon is protecting the fuel tanker. In Timbuktu, I am welcomed by Captain Clément who has been protecting the airport with his hundred or so legionnaires. We are far from the Ametettai and Tessalit, but everyone remains vigilant. In a few

days, they will have reached Abidjan and can finally relax. In the meantime, I still need them to secure our base. At the entrance to the large hangar, a chief corporal greets me with a thick accent. He hands me a can, which I share with him and his corporal while waiting for the refueling to finish: a sign of hospitality and respect for your leaders. It is 6 pm, the crew tells us it's time to go and we take off for Gao, a long flight over the Niger River, the meadows, and inhabited fields. Seen from above, the canoes are tiny and the herds barely visible. With the doors open, it is almost cool. Our eyes are mesmerized by these magnificent landscapes. I don't regret leaving the CP.

In 48 hours, the squadron will have reached Timbuktu. Starting tomorrow, the units of CAT 2 will leave for Operation Gustav north of Bourem. I isolate myself with my close team to reread the orders, and make sure that the supports will be in place for each phase: helicopters, artillery, and fighter jets. I have no doubt that our armored vehicles will be closely followed by static observers or pickups as soon as they leave the base. The target is more than 60 miles to the north. It is a large valley 30 miles long and 10 miles wide, and runs perpendicular to the Trans-Saharan. Intelligence indicates a probable terrorist presence and above all ammunition depots in the wadi—an ideal and unsuspected cache, close to our logistics route. Same as with Doro: specialized teams and our intelligence office have indicated several MUJWA hideouts and the supply areas. To avoid revealing our intentions, we plan to leave the next day and set up a bivouac area 20 miles south of our final destination, so our enemy thinks we will turn left and head west toward Bourem. There are still a few rocket shooters in this area. Helicopters have been ordered not to fly over the eastern part of the Trans-Saharan.

Saturday, April 6

Departure of CAT 2 for Gustav

The CAT 2 columns are ready. All the units of the 3rd Brigade are represented: the Gauls from Clermont-Ferrand, the Bisons from Brive, the artillerymen from La Valbonne, the combat engineers from Castelsarrasin and the Crocos from Angoulême. Colonel Bert is mindful that he has a real combined arms battalion under his command for a large-scale offensive mission. Leading the way are the Malian pickups from the Tuareg CAT 8, ready to head north. The Africans are in good spirits and they are not afraid to fight back if the MUJWA combatants decide to put up resistance in this neglected valley.

At noon, the base is empty: nearly 1,000 men and 150 vehicles are on the Anefis road. Two APCs have been emptied to take some journalists who wish to participate in this large-scale operation.

Sunday, April 7

The valley is empty, ammunition stockpiles are full

Up at 4 am. Helicopters fly over Bourem while armored units of AIFV and X-10RC are back on the Trans-Saharan. At 6 am, the units turned right and, taking advantage of their night optics (light intensifiers and thermal cameras), headed east to close off the valley from the north. The all-terrain AIFVs had very little difficulty on the roads and reached their targets more quickly than the Malian pickups. At 8 am, the valley is under surveillance, the armored vehicles are under observation on a continuous line. The first discoveries are reported: piles of rockets, shells, and crates are found in the open air, in gullies, under trees, and in the crevices in the ground. The combat engineers spend hours counting and removing them under the protection of the infantrymen. I make a round trip to CAT 2's CP. No movement has been detected so far. We give ourselves three days to search the valley and check the houses in the area.

Monday, April 8

Gourma-Rharous liberated by Dacko's Malian troops

Like every morning since our arrival in Gao, we meet with our allies to coordinate our actions and exchange information. Senior Colonel Dacko, the chief of police, the heads of the AFISMA detachment, including Gabriel for the Nigerien battalion, Denis, and now me again. The discussion is open and friendly. This is an opportunity to take stock of past and future operations, to be transparent with one another about what we can or cannot do. We regularly adjust our plans based on the information exchanged, the requirements, and the objectives of our allies, whose capabilities are increasing with each passing week. By mid-April, the Malian forces will have started taking the initiative again and conducting autonomous operations in the Niger bend, alone or with our LU fully integrated into their operations.

Dacko sent his CATs to Gourma, the region south of the Niger River. His pickups carry out raids lasting several days. His troops are welcomed as liberators in the small villages. The Malian flag is hoisted in the presence of the local population, which has regained its freedom and security. A little known fact: the raids are assisted by flights of small observation planes that regularly send messages to the ground, or even digital photos, using USB sticks that are sent in a box and immediately exploited by their small mobile CP. We are following with interest these initiatives, which have resulted in the capture of the remaining jihadists hiding in the wide

open spaces between Timbuktu and Gao, south of the river. Filled with respect and a great sense of fraternity, the morning meetings are an opportunity to get to know each other better and to understand each other's way of working and thinking. During my six weeks of absence, Denis has continued these meetings initiated by Xavier upon his arrival in Gao.

Pressure from the NMLA

Strong bonds of friendship have been forged through common battles and tactical victories, but the situation is changing and we all feel it. The terrorists have adopted a strategy of avoidance, which Gustav confirms. The Malian army is rebuilding after the humiliation of January. Senior Colonel Dacko's battalions accompanied us effectively in the reconquest of the Niger bend and the fighting units are mainly regrouping in Gao, while the EUTM program is training the first units in Koulikoro.

After having helped us by detaching some guides of Tuareg origin for our convoys, the Malians wish to regain a foothold in the northern cities.

This demand is all the more pressing as they see the NMLA filling the gaps left by AQIM and the MUJWA, their former allies of 2012. The more independence sympathizers there are in Kidal, Anefis, and Menaka, and the closer they get to Niger—which they are actively trying to do—, the more sensitive the issue becomes for our Malian allies.

We quickly realize that the phase of liberating the country and destroying the terrorist katibas is over. The initial military phase ends with a series of tactical victories that will only make sense if followed by a new diplomatic deal. The weapons have spoken, but the response can only be political. The ancestral dispute between Tuareg Malians and Southern Malians remains unresolved, and the subject naturally comes back to the table with all the more acuteness and difficulty as the last decades have been marked by a long series of regularly betrayed agreements, massacres, and shared mistrust. While the Tuaregs enjoy a positive image in Europe as free men, the Malians have not forgotten their alliance with the jihadists, albeit against a failing government in Bamako. The new democratically elected president has not yet arrived and the military victory over the jihadists has been surprisingly swift and effective. For France and more generally for the international community, it is now a question of maintaining peace, finding a political solution, and preventing the resumption of inter-ethnic conflict. For the brigade, the objective is to gain time for the reconciliation process to take place, while avoiding confrontations between the Malian army and the NMLA, all the more so as the latter is increasing its zone of influence and exerting pressure by mobilizing women and children during

demonstrations that receive varying degrees of media coverage. In this context, the unchanged orders are to avoid engaging with the NMLA and to keep, for the time being, Malian troops south of the Niger River. This wait-and-see attitude is fairly well understood by our allies, who do not fail to point out to us the contacts made by elements outside the brigade with NMLA representatives in Kidal. Despite these internal tensions, we continue our successful cooperation as the operations continue unabated.

The withdrawal of the units is brought forward, at the same time as the rotations. In the evening, I am invited to the HU's sending off party in Gao. It was immediately replaced by another unit, the 1st Combat Helicopter Regiment stationed in Phalsburg. We send them off with emotion, this team of pilots, mechanics, and weather officers from the 5th, with whom we have lived and fought daily for almost three months. Gout offers me a live Tiger rocket, which just arrived from France that morning in a Transall delivering spare parts.

After the paratroopers of Tessalit, now the pilots, and soon the Porpoises from CAT 3, another page is turning.

Night has fallen. The Gauls infiltrate the large valley on foot to try to surprise the terrorists. The infantry is equipped with night vision and advances silently through the thorn trees. At the same time, my intelligence office gives me some interesting information: the existence of several 50-gallon barrels of gasoline hidden in the small town of Almoustarat. There are no gas stations in this area, and it is worth asking our allies to try to find out if this is a supply point for motorized ranchers, for terrorists in pickups, or for both. "*Given the complexity of Mali, I'll give myself time to think.*"

Tuesday, April 9

Emptying the MUJWA bunkers, the terrorist's perfect kit

The morning is spent discussing with Bamako the timetable for reducing troop numbers and how to go about it. At the same time, we agree with our Malian allies to conduct a limited but joint operation on the Almoustarat depot, a sensitive operation, validated by the Bamako CP. I take advantage of this relative calm to follow up on the transfer requests for my commanders and to support a few cases that are not looking good.

At 4 pm, I make a round trip to check on Operation Gustav. The Gauls searched the wadi and they have just approached a nomadic camp near the few buildings of In Aïs at the same time as they reach the small village of Fez en Fez. Since the beginning, a few men who tried to flee have been

arrested and handed over to the Malian authorities. Hundreds of shells, rockets, and ammunition boxes are located and dug up. Usable and transportable "war spoils" are loaded onto trucks and taken to Gao to be returned to the Malian army. Most of the ammunition had been looted from Mali's depots by the jihadists. Ammunition that is considered damaged, "bad ammo" to use our jargon, is destroyed on the spot in a detonation kiln using explosives. Among the surprising things we found are 16 aircraft bombs in their wooden packaging, enough to make powerful improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that can be used against our troops or civilians. The intel was accurate, and we were right to come here and clean out the MUJWA bunkers. In addition to the 20 tons of weapons and ammunition, there is a workshop for manufacturing IEDs: wires, batteries, detonators, gas cylinders, mobile phones, switches, and watches…the perfect kit for a terrorist. Military equipment is found by the Gauls from CAT 2: radio sets, abandoned vehicles, fuel, camping equipment, and fatigues. The depot was guarded, but the few terrorists left guarding preferred to flee, rather than put up a fight.

At In Aïs, which we have just reached, we find a huge camouflaged generator that I have sent to Gao for more official and peaceful uses. Nearby, under some low tents, we meet families with their chickens and goats, women, old people, and children. The Malian police, who accompany us everywhere, question them. My soldiers stand at a safe distance, observing the surroundings so as not to be surprised by any suicide bombers. The AIFVs move beyond the camp to observe and search further.

I find the journalists in the two APCs, each detached to a unit in two different areas, in accordance with their request. The operations are not spectacular and the numbers may seem large, over 1,000 men, but the area is huge. The deployment of the troops and the discoveries are broadcast by the national channels and the newspapers closely associated with this last major operation, which risks giving people in France the impression that a terrorist resurgence is a possibility, which is far from being the case.

While waiting for the Puma to return, we share our impressions with Bert and his captains. The sections on foot and in vehicles criss-cross the area, finding new spoils here and there. The African sun sets on the horizon. The low-angled light makes the armored vehicles vividly stand out as they cross the valley. They have already traveled thousands of miles. Seeing the helicopters arrive, I remind the colonel that without Operation Serval we would be at this moment between Mailly and Reims running a combat exercise in open terrain with a single AIFV unit and a 75-mile

range. This maneuver, well known for safety reasons, was to be the peak effort of the brigade's biennial exercise, scheduled for spring 2013.

In Gao, the CP followed Gustav closely, but, as usual, kept its eyes on the future, the balance of power, the need to be present everywhere and to show it, despite the current withdrawals.

It's 10 pm. In Timbuktu, the squadron has returned from Araouane. It immediately starts patrolling in town to reassure the population. The company of paratroopers will leave for Abidjan the next day. We will have to wait for our Burkinabé allies to arrive to entrust them with the next missions that we are already planning for Goundam and the dry lake of Faguibine, where terrorists and bandits are reportedly terrorizing the population. Geography and history continue to ring a bell. Looking at the map and these inhospitable places, I reread the accounts of Lieutenant Colonel Joffre, which tell of the violent battles waged against tribes in this same area in 1894.

In Tessalit, there are only 400 men left in the camp, where there were nearly 2,000 just ten days ago. The armored squadron conducts a few patrols near the town to monitor the area, especially since we have detected AQIM telephone transmissions. Aerial observations have not detected anything since we left for the Tigharghar. We are considering the possibility of sending them on a nomadic mission to monitor the valleys and specifically the Ametettai.

In Gao, the small team is already working on another valley north of In Aïs, which is smaller, but where the population has indicated other MUJWA depots. At the same time, in liaison with Bamako and our Malian allies, we are planning to conduct a raid with a few vehicles and helicopters to check the hypothetical fuel depot at Almoustarat, between Gao and Anefis. My three officers are aware. They have not had half a day's rest since their arrival, but they would not exchange their place for anything in the world. It's during missions like these, that they have never seen or carried out during their careers, where maneuver, surprise, and imagination are the keys to victory. In principle, I have just validated in a small committee four new missions to be carried out in the near future. Once again, the night will be short. Just as I am about to leave, we learn that an American Predator drone has crashed in our area. Air support is mobilized to locate the wreckage. Bamako naturally asks us to be ready to send a team to recover sensitive subassemblies and destroy the aircraft before the enemy arrives on the scene. This mission will be the responsibility of the group of parachute commandos that I was able to keep for a few more

days. Combined with a small helicopter detachment, they are my strike force for one-off missions like this. For my team of planners, this drone represents a fifth mission to prepare!

Wednesday, April 10

Air-conditioning for soldiers

The operation on Almoustarat is underway. Light armored vehicles left Gao at 2 am. Overflown by armed helicopters, they approach the town at dawn with a detachment of Malian police and soldiers who arrest six men, including a drug trafficker with supposed ties to the MUJWA. The fuel is nowhere to be found. The intelligence must have been old. Meanwhile, the Gauls of CAT 2 are wrapping up Gustav further south.

Around noon, I welcome the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations and a delegation that is coming to assess the future facilities capacity at the airport. After a short presentation and an open discussion on the security situation in the Gao region, I decide to give them a tour of our facilities and the CP. The two UN officers, both from the United States, are surprised to see how rustic our deployment is, the absence of air-conditioning and the restrictions on water. For the past few days, we have had about 15 air-conditioned tents that we have taken care to distribute among the CATs so soldiers returning from the field or from guard duty can cool down for a few hours and recover. Until now, only the field hospital's two tents were equipped with air-conditioning. Obviously, with my command team, we refused to offer preferential treatment for the CP and staff who have been housed from the beginning in the same conditions as the troops. The only exception to the rule is an air-conditioned meeting tent set up in the hangar where operations are prepared and, later, where confidential summary documents called an end-of-mission report are drafted. On leaving this tent, the officers are shocked by overwhelming heat, 115 °F from morning to evening.

For a laugh and bit of amusement, I show them my 30-square-foot office that I share with Denis and Rémi. The decor is simple: a makeshift table on which are placed the little Victory of Constantine, a computer, a notebook, and two secure phones. The brigade's flag is hanging behind the chair, facing the entrance. Along the wall only the essentials remain: a crate of water bottles, two boxes of field rations, and my carved cane. My two neighbors, sitting shoulder to shoulder, share the same rugged conditions. Seeing our guests stunned for a few seconds, we understand that they had a completely different idea of a French general's office in the field, far removed from American and UN standards.

I spend part of the afternoon with Denis and the staff finishing the general organization of the end-of-mission report. At the end of the day, each cell knows its contribution and deadlines. Several coordination, proofreading, and validation sessions will be held until we return to Clermont-Ferrand and before it is sent to the general staff of the armies.

My close team has recovered from an outbreak of stomach flu that thinned the ranks for a few days. They wisely suggested that we share our field rations with our guests, which we will every evening.

This evening of April 10 is without doubt one of the most pleasant. Reserved for the women working in the TOC, I have the pleasure of dining with eight officers and NCOs from every cell, most of them from my brigade and its regiments, all of them "*relaxed and happy to serve*!"

Thursday, April 11

Operation Garigliano

An ordinary day and yet full of independent events

At dawn, CAT 2's AIFVs quickly approach the Alfachara wadi further north. Operation Garigliano has just begun. It will lead to other discoveries: radio equipment, uniforms, pickups, ammunition and weapons, but without resistance from an enemy that refrains from fighting, even if it means abandoning weapons and kit.

At 6 am, I welcome the Malian prime minister on the runway. A Malian company and a French section present arms as honor guard. I offer him a coffee with his companions in a tent near the runway, as we do with all the foreign officials until we leave. It is always an opportunity for these ministers and generals, most of them from West Africa, to congratulate Serval and to thank France for having avoided the worst, the de facto establishment of a jihadist state threatening regional stability.

The withdrawals continue. The parachute company from the 1st PCR—which took part in the assaults in Gao, Kidal, and Tessalit in February and March—must also return to France. They have been guarding the airstrip and the camp in Kidal while I was in the North. Their commander is top notch, and they have just spent two months alone, in liaison with a small team of special forces on the site. As the Kidal camp has to be maintained, we decide to replace the paratroopers with Bisons from the 126th, equipped with APCs. After Menaka, Terz, and Gao, they reach Kidal by road, which reduces the capacity of CAT 2, now down to two infantry companies.

I haven't been back to Gao for weeks, I haven't seen the city center and the Malian forces' security arrangements. Taking advantage of the relative calm, accompanied by Rémi, Denis, and my bodyguards, I take the liberty of visiting the Northern Checkpoint, manned by Malian soldiers. They control the road to Bourem that terrorists have often used to carry out attacks. Every vehicle, trailer, and motorcycle, is scrupulously searched. The Malians are happy to have visitors. They enthusiastically show me everything: their weapons, their battle stations, and the waiting areas for vehicles. I spend a long time chatting with the two Malian NCOs, the first, a sergeant major, has been serving for 38 years, the second, a warrant officer, for 21 years. Their shoes are worn, but they have regained their pride, their authority too. Both are from Gao. Here, they defend their families, their city, and their country.

Foosball in the streets of Gao

We even take some pictures with Denis and Rémi. It is a pleasure meeting these soldiers. Life is returning to normal outside the airport. We go down to the city center to see the market, the banks of the Niger River, and the fish merchants. My bodyguards are not too reassured, as terrorists have regularly infiltrated this area. However, the small alley looks harmless and the two Malian merchants are smiling. They explain to me the properties of the spices sold in small plastic bags, those for the husbands, whose virtues I can only imagine when I see them bursting into laughter, and those for the kitchen. In the middle of the street stands an old wooden foosball table. My sergeant major looks at me with his black eyes, scanning the surroundings. A few minutes are enough to lose a memorable game with two enthusiastic children. It is for them, for their freedom and happiness that we have been fighting since January.

My soldiers know this. As they crossed Mali, they were applauded by hundreds of thousands of Malian adults, women, children, and old people along the roads. They rub shoulders with them every day and fully appreciate the gratitude of this liberated population. They appreciate this support all the more because many of them have been to Afghanistan under quite different circumstances, fearing mines and gunfire, without the support of a population that is at best silent and at worst hostile to foreigners. I take my leave of the Niger waterfront by warmly saluting our two winners. They have found hope. Looking at the younger one, I recall an old memory from a different time and place.

Bosnia, during the winter of '93/94. Every day, my company of Gauls and our ten trucks carrying food would supply 25 Bosnian villages in the

Bihac Pocket. It was cold and the sight of the children always got to us, even though they were generally happy to see us coming. Once a month, the guns stopped firing around the snow-covered ghost town of Bosanska-Krupa on the Bosnian-Serbian border. We went down to the center to feed those who had not wanted to leave their home. For two hours, the time it took to unload the supplies, they dared to come out into the open, approach us, and thank us. Our armored vehicles held the Serbian positions in check on the opposite hills. The women and children had decayed teeth, fungal infections, signs of malnutrition, and frightened looks on their faces. Each time, I took my doctor and his medical APC to provide much needed emergency care. We went there on Christmas Eve with the packages and gifts our families had sent for the Bosnian children. Each soldier had distributed his package. I gave a beautiful doll in a dress to a little blonde girl who was so happy to receive it. I saw her go back into the basement of her half-destroyed building clutching her gift and turning to smile at me, pulled away by her mother.

Images of broken destinies, the secret garden of French soldiers

The illuminated face of this little girl in rags and in danger remains engraved in my memory. A week later, as a reciprocal gesture, we went to supply the ghost town of Titov Drvar on the Serbian side. The misery and poverty of the civilians and children were similar, perhaps even worse. There were no NGOs on this side to alleviate the hardships. This wintry war was only a two-hour flight from Paris. Our peacekeepers were proud of their mission and the daily immersion in the realities of a civil war was enough to motivate them. The worst fighting took place between the pro-Izetbegovic Bosniaks and the pro-Abdic Bosniaks, along a front line that cut the pocket in half—itself surrounded by the Serbs. It truly was a village of resistance. Every French soldier keeps locked away similar memories of war, images of broken destinies, but also moments of generosity that managed to relieve the harsh realities of life and give hope to abandoned people and lost children. The little girl in Bosanska-Krupa or the old man of Titov Drvar playing *Tamo Daleko* on the harmonica—a Franco-Serbian folk song from WWI—on a sidewalk swept by a Siberian wind. The frightened look of Joannes, a little Ivorian boy clinging to his mother in the trust zone, constantly worrying about bandits and roadblocks. Finally, the faded smile of Sudanese children in the Forchana refugee camp in the Ouaddai region of Chad. All of these memories are part of my reason for being and make me proud to serve under our flag. Proud of my country, its generosity, and its commitment to humanity.

As I leave the alley of Gao and the laughter of children and the saleswomen, I realize once again that this operation is unlike any other. Since

January, I have led us to liberate towns and regions and destroy the katibas from my various CPs, reconquering strongholds in the burning valleys of Tigharghar and the Greater Gao. Seeing this grateful and carefree population, I take a deep breath of fresh air, perceiving the joy of freedom, the newfound stability of families, the protection of soldiers, the *raison d'être* of an army in the field. These two hours away from my CP, away from the pressures of Paris and the questions of Bamako, were a moment of happiness shared simply with free men and women because of our action, one of the best moments of this operation.

Back at the CP, the officer of the watch tells me of an incident between a Malian patrol and the NMLA outposts north of Gao. Our units were nearby. I sense that tensions are rising and that there is a risk we will soon find ourselves being used by one of the two parties, as in the Balkans or in Ivory Coast. Units are reminded to remain impartial and cautious and are well aware that any failure to do so will get out and be quickly exploited.

It's 9 pm. We share our field rations, this time using real plates, on the terrace of the small control tower, with our compatriot journalists from *Paris Match*, just back from Gustav and Garigliano. I can see that they are just as exhausted as we are.

Friday, April 12

Burkinabés in Timbuktu

Operation Garigliano is winding down and the CAT 2 units will return in a column during the day, after several days of searches and discoveries. In Timbuktu, the nearly 600-strong Burkinabé battalion is settling in at the airport. As soon as they are relieved, the squadron will resume its nomadic searches for terrorists in the Faguibine Lake area.

In Tessalit, the squadron is on standby, ready to head west of the Adrar, while the Chadians and the company that just arrived in Kidal did the same on the eastern side. The orders are ready. I want to keep up the pressure everywhere to assert our presence, especially in liaison with our Malian, Chadian, Nigerien, and now Burkinabé friends. We make sure that everyone has air cover and that forward surgical teams are in place in case we come up against resistance and need to evacuate our wounded. This is becoming complicated due to the fragmentation of our force and the distances. If we cannot maneuver simultaneously, we will act successively if there is insufficient support: a principle we know well from the National War College. In any case, we must once again act quickly to prevent the

enemy from being tempted to reoccupy the terrain, but also because our units are increasingly being called upon to relinquish their equipment and return to France.

Early in the morning, I meet as usual with the journalists in Gao to give them a briefing on our activities and the results of the last operation they were embedded in. Afterwards, I meet up with Senior Colonel Dacko, who has set up his CP a few hundred yards away in the airport compound. Sitting on a bench under a tree, we talk with Denis about the situation and the missions to come to divvy up the tasks, when he receives a phone call informing us of an attack against the Chadians, in the market of Kidal. It will take some time to get updated on the situation. A suicide bomber blew himself up in a market stall frequented by soldiers stationed in the camp. The town is under NMLA control, which quickly leads our allies to assert that the movement is behind the attack. It is too early to tell for sure, and this event highlights the fact that the independence party is unable to guarantee security in this town, which undermines its credibility.

The explosion killed three soldiers and injured four others. Our helicopters are immediately mobilized to evacuate our allies to Gao and get them urgent treatment at the field hospital. I imagine that my colleague Bikimo has taken a rough hit, so I have the LU tell him that our resources are at his disposal, as in the Adrar, and that I will come and see him the next day. How can we understand the reasons for this terrorist attack? For me, this is a strong signal, a resumption of asymmetric warfare, the battle of cowards. Each unit is alerted and everyone is reminded of safeguards and precautionary measures. The level of vigilance is increased for guard posts and exterior patrols.

Despite the apparent calm, I was still worried that our enemy was capable of striking and had ordered our troops not to go into town in Gao, Timbuktu, and Tessalit. It was therefore not difficult to put all the guard units deployed in the field on alert, or at rest for a small minority. I also stopped all sorties, knowing from experience that after the initial fighting and stabilization, several people coming knocking at the door of our facilities seeking assistance, sometimes not fully aware of the danger or informed of the latest incidents and measures.

We maintain direct and regular contact with all the local institutions. Merchants, public works managers, the police, civil-military officers in charge of reconstruction projects, chaplains, and doctors have to be warned as soon as possible by radio, or picked up in town at building sites or in the hospitals, which is done quickly.

The afternoon is spent preparing for the next missions, but also in meetings to decide promotions and appointments, which are a permanent and demanding duty for any leader in France, as are operations.

The meetings follow one after the other but no two are the same. After two hours of evaluations with my HR captain, I go back to operations, the security of our men in Kidal, and preparations to launch future missions. This is the secret of an officer's life, to know how to quickly transition from "organic" issues (the term used for administrative tasks and HR) to operations, exercises, and combat. This is also the beauty of this unusual job.

This young corporal has legitimate life plans

It's time to go to the tower, 200 yards from the hangar. The communications officer on duty at the entrance to the bivouac area salutes me. We exchange a few words about the mission and her life back in Clermont-Ferrand. She is from the Command and Supply Train Company, the part of the staff that does most of the heavy lifting. We know each other well as we have done many maneuvers at camps and during combat exercises in the Champagne, Provence, and Haute-Loire regions. She and her colleagues put up the tents and manage the complex communication systems, the mass of cables and wiring that runs along the walls. Among other things, she stands guard with her weapon day and night in front of the CP. We don't talk much about communications. Without them, the CATs and units would be deaf, blind, and without orders. This young corporal has legitimate life plans. Inwardly, I hope that she is one day able to start a family, to be happy, to maintain a work-life balance, and keep smiling.

Outside, an AIFV section passes by and joins CAT 2's bivouac area, 400 yards from us. They have just conducted a surveillance patrol around Gao with Malian pickups. Near the hangar, the men line up silently, towels over their shoulders in front of the shower trailer. Water is scarce, and they are instructed to shower as quickly as possible. The evening breeze sweeps through the aligned tents. Sand seeps in everywhere.

I find my two acolytes, Denis and Rémi, at the entrance to the bivouac area. We enjoy a simple dinner together. People are telling all the good stories from the day. The group from Bamako and Timbuktu has been reconstituted. The chief of staff—an old captain and infantryman from Auvergne—takes out part of a sausage received the day before from Clermont-Ferrand. The sergeant major—an experienced NCO and African combat engineer—has found some lettuce and the Bison bodyguards from Brive have a hunk of cheese. We open the bottle of Californian wine of-

fered by the Deputy Secretary General of the UN the day before and Denis puts the last of his *calisson* cookies from Aix on the table. Two lieutenants, a legal officer and a communications officer, helped my driver Marie-Jo set the table. They turned off the outside lights to avoid disturbing helicopter pilots who land and take off at night so they won't be seen from outside the base. They didn't bring anything to share, but their good mood delights us and they are quickly heckled by the comical HR captain. The sergeant major, my flag bearer, has just returned from his air transit and the runway where he spent the day. He takes out some dry cakes sent by his wife to go with the coffee.

Night has fallen on Gao. This little tower feels like an oven. Built of concrete, it stores the day's heat only to release it during the night. Despite the heat, we will stay there until the guards change. Sharpshooters have fixed their night scopes and are watching the wide open expanse on the other side of the runway from the rooftops and buildings. Our wounded Chadians are operated on as soon as they arrive at the field hospital. They were saved.

Saturday, April 13

Visit to Kidal: a ghost town

The warmth of the walls and the tendinitis wake me up early. I send a few text messages to family and friends, obviously without revealing any information about the operation, giving myself a few precious moments of privacy, in addition to the letters I send to the children each week. In three and a half months, we will have left Auvergne for a new, undetermined base. Five moves in less than ten years and with each move comes the settling in process, renting a home, enrolling the kids in school, new landmarks, and new friends for the spouse. This is the normal life of soldiers who change jobs regularly and impose a nomadic life on their loved ones. The constraints either break up the family or reveal its resilience.

7 am. I take off in a Puma for Kidal with Rémi and a small team from the CP. I want to see General Bikimo and my company of Bisons again. The camp closely resembles the one in Tessalit. It is located on the edge of town and consists of small single-story stone buildings for troops and offices, all surrounded by a long, high perimeter wall about 800 by 900 yards long. The helicopter landing area is overlooked by a small rocky outcropping about 500 yards on the other side of the compound, which is not very comfortable. Guards stand watch in pairs along the perimeter to prevent enemy infiltration. In the center of the camp is a water tower on stilts. The pumps and hoses no longer work, and there is a line to fill up the jerry cans. The French

contingent was reduced to fewer than 300 soldiers, the Chadian contingent to more than 1,000 men, those from Aguelhok. We are greeted by the small detachment of special forces and some other officers in fatigues. They carry out intelligence missions in town. My infantrymen are protecting the base and the dirt airstrip a mile or so to the north. They conduct reconnaissance and patrols, alone or with the Chadians. They arrived the day before and took over the quarters of the paratroopers from the 1st PCR. The barracks have no facilities, but they are in the shade. The heat is overwhelming. The captain introduces me to his company, which I informally gather around me in a half-circle to explain what I expect from them in this sensitive area, to remind them of the risks, to let them know that their mission in Kidal will probably last one to two months, and, of course, to instill the cohesion they will need to make it through these long weeks of isolation. They are tough. After Ménaka, Tessalit for some, Terz and Gao, here they are, gathered in Kidal and back from Gustav. They are in good spirits, and I can see in their eyes and from our verbal exchanges that they will stand firm like disciplined poilus in their trench. It is the hallmark of the Bisons: discreet and efficient, like infantry on the front line.

Their colleagues from CAT 3 will soon return to France, but I'm counting on them to hold the Kidal outpost without coming under fire if possible. They will likely be the last to return with the combat engineers in June. Their doctor has moved into a small building with his nurses. She just managed to stem an outbreak of stomach flu. Water is scarce, and the camp is overcrowded compared to its resources.

The visit to town shows a reflection of its reputation. The streets are deserted. The houses are largely abandoned. Some herds of goats cross the intersections. Kidal was a large and populous regional capital. It used to have 50,000 inhabitants. There must be 10 to 20% left; the others fled to the countryside, as in Tessalit, before our return. The children say hello to our two vehicles. Their bodies are hunched over and wrapped in their scarves. The airstrip is short and ends in a street. A simple stone building serves as a control tower. It is totally empty. The other end is cut by a one-yard-high embankment that runs for miles around the town, open in some places that are guarded by pickups topped by a large NMLA flag. Two of these vehicles are positioned at the end of the runway, as checkpoints for the eastern entrances and exits of the town. This artificial barrier is permeable to pedestrians. The town is clearly under NMLA control, but it is impossible to control everything. The public buildings—the hospital and the universities—are still standing but are no longer being used, making the place seem like the Wild West. Thorny bushes grow across the

abandoned boulevards, armed pickups speed past us with flags painted on their hoods. The market street is empty. The stall blown up by the suicide bomber is clearly visible in the middle of a row of black and dirty shacks, all of which are closed. We pass in front of the old French fort, a massive building done in beautiful masonry, with rounded corners at the base and square ones for the upper floors. Destroyed armored vehicles surround it. Its occupants of the last century must be turning in their graves. Opposite, a beautiful colonial-style building was to serve as the base mess hall.

Kidal is the capital, the political key to Northern Mali. The Tuaregs of the north, from the Ifoghas, have settled here. The challenge of this diplomatic and political transition phase is to prevent them from once again siding with the terrorist movements. The Tuaregs were burned by the jihadists' betrayal in 2012 and their ouster from this unnatural alliance. They have to find the narrow space between the weakened terrorists, who want to regain a foothold, and a government in Bamako that has been strengthened by Serval, but which seems reluctant to give them a seat at the table in the ongoing political reconstruction. The stabilization phase has started. After the weapons are put down, it is time for diplomacy to take over and for us to avoid being used by either side in this ancient and complex game. We quickly revert to our age-old stabilization reflexes, the ones applied for years in the Balkans and in Africa: remain vigilant and impartial, and encourage a return to the political process. For the military, this phase is less dangerous, but more complicated in its execution. Every misstep can be exploited by belligerents who quickly seek to discredit the force. Inappropriate behavior, the wrong reaction from an ordinary soldier can have disproportionate repercussions, hence the notion of the "strategic corporal" and consequently the need to properly educate and train our troops, so that they fully understand the spirit and the letter of their mission, the issues at stake, and the pitfalls to be avoided.

Our Chadian allies are resting in their buildings. The pickups and armored vehicles of the Adrar are parked, ready to leave at a moment's notice. I meet them when we get back from our trip into town. I find Bikimo and give him the condolences of his French friends. Obviously, he doesn't like this situation. The proximity of the town and the risks that his soldiers now face mean that Kidal is probably not the best location for his contingent, especially since the lack of water and electricity is not sitting well with his troops. No doubt he misses the airy and shady bivouac area in Aguelhok. We discuss the upcoming joint mission to the Abeibara region further north, where some terrorists have reportedly been spotted again. Our soldiers are now used to patrolling together,

even though the way we do things are very different. We both feel that the combat phase is coming to an end and that we must win the peace by avoiding becoming the target of these indiscriminate attacks. My colleague has good experience from UN missions and he is no stranger to these shifts in posture. I went around and saw what I came to see: my infantry company, the town of Kidal, and our Chadian allies. A new joint operation will be launched soon, and I have ensured that our infantrymen are being put to good use. With my team, two people split one ration each before boarding the Puma that takes us back to Gao. The situation in the area has not changed. The Gauls from the 92nd patrol around the city and expand the surveillance perimeters.

Kidal's Raptors have earned their keep

It is already 5 pm, and Rémi warns me of the imminent departure of the paratrooper company from the 1st PCR —the one from Kidal—in transit in the camp. These men were directly involved in the liberation of Gao, Kidal, and Tessalit. They carried out three assault landings by quickly disembarking from their Transall aircraft, which had just landed in the insecure area. They are now gathered in the rec area, in a square surrounded by large tents, where the soldiers meet in the evening. As with all departing units, I come to see them again and talk to them before we have a drink together.

This is an opportunity to remind them of the progress made in three months, the legitimate pride they can feel for this operation and some truths that I firmly believe: the brotherhood of arms, between soldiers and units, all housed under the same roof and interdependent in action, the role of support and equipment, the toughness, experience, and courage of the men, the proof of our operational readiness before we left France, the importance of morale, and a well-deserved victory. This final address usually ends with the soldiers singing a song, always with a handshake between the general and his men, as he goes around the groups. It is also an opportunity for them to reveal some secrets about the solutions they came up with in a bind, to talk about the difficulties they encountered, and recount some funny situations that are always good for a laugh when looking back. I don't care what brigade they come from, they're all the same to me. All of them belong to the Serval Brigade. They won. Their faces were blackened by the sun. Their fatigues are faded and bleached. Some have lost weight under the harsh heat of the sun or due to stomach flu, but they all have one thing in common. An unmistakable look on their face and in their attitude. They are victorious and they have liberated a country. You can see it in their eyes.

In the days that followed, I will greet the units of the Adrar and Gao, usually the day before their departure by Transall or Hercules for Bamako, where they'll make a stopover before Paphos, then France. Denis and I watch them take off from the tower always with a twinge of sadness, but no regrets. Life goes on.

In the evening, more HR work is waiting for me. This will take up a lot of my rare free time before leaving the theater. This time it's for commendations for units and individuals. It's a sensitive subject, and I look closely at these commendations and decorations my colonels have asked me to approve for their men. In accordance with the instructions I have given them, I want to ensure that everyone is commended appropriately and that there is no injustice between the units. I want deserving men and women, of all ranks and all units, to be nominated. The general staff of the armies will then decide, and the decorations and written commendations will be sent to their original corps, which will bestow them on their recipients during the parade. To mark the occasion, I have asked the staff to accelerate the procedure for a small number of particularly deserving commanders and soldiers, with the aim of decorating them on the spot, on the occasion of our next commemoration ceremony on May 8th. They will be ready just in time for it.

Sunday, April 14–Monday, April 15

Continue operations and contain the epidemic

Two days of work with the HR officer and meticulous preparation for the next four operations: the Ametettai for the Tessalit squadron, Abeibara for the Chadians and the company in Kidal, the Sémit wadi in the Greater Gao region for CAT 2, and the Faguibine Lake for the Timbuktu squadron, which is currently being relieved by the Burkinabé contingent. The meetings to prepare the missions follow the more confidential HR work. We are visited by journalists, including Frédéric Pons, who attends the morning meeting of the allies with their permission.

On the 15th, the Bisons leave Kidal with the Chadian contingent for a raid and searches on the way to Abeibara, which they reach in the evening.

In addition to the four simultaneous operations, we renew a very specific surveillance mission in Gao. The divers from the 31st Eng Rgt have discreetly brought their black kayaks to the edge of the Niger River and are spending the night on nautical patrols and observation to see what is going on between the two banks. In warm periods, the water level is very low and crossing the river is less complicated. An

armed infiltration mission, this type of operation will be repeated several times to monitor suspicious islands and river banks. The Porpoises from CAT 3 are getting ready to return to France and have been guarding the base so AIFV sections can prepare for the next raid into a suspicious wadi, an area the Gauls know well, about 150 miles past Djebok and toward Talataye in the Greater Gao region.

Our intelligence research teams leave the camp once again to glean the right information. On April 15th, they reach their zone with a Malian company on pickups. The two contingents trust each other and have had great success from the beginning. Taking advantage of a tip-off from locals, they rush into a village where they surprise and capture some 30 suspected terrorists, including a leader known and wanted for his experience in planting explosive devices. This raid highlights once again the importance of field intelligence obtained and exploited by the brigade's contact units and specialized detachments. It also confirms the renewed effectiveness of our Malian allies in reinvesting the rural parts of the country and conducting distant operations. The heat becomes more intense every day and reaches 120 °F. You have to drink one and a half liters of water each meal and keep an eye on your neighbor. The field hospital is full again; the stomach flu is running rampant through the camp, decimating the units. My morning visits to the tents and the units made me realize that there is a real risk that these units could become so badly undermanned that they can no longer be engaged. I call a late afternoon meeting to discuss possible improvements and to make sure that everything is being done to end this operation well. What we call "human support" becomes my major concern, especially as the troops are exhausted after three uninterrupted months in extreme heat and discomfort. The facilities officer is doing the best he can. He plans to organize the space differently and add resources by mid-May. A permanent kitchen, toilets, and shower facilities are being built. The newcomers will take advantage of them. Air-conditioned tents will be sent, along with substantial improvements for water and electricity, but we are in mid-April and we have to hold out while avoiding the risk of epidemics and physical collapse. Officers, commanders, and soldiers at the CP, including those from the Communications Company, have not been spared. The ranks are thinning out and, in the hangar, the temperature reaches 117 °F. Everyone is dreaming of 95° F heat waves back in France!

Clearly, our enemy is no longer the terrorist, but the heat and its effects. The pressure from Paris to maintain the fast pace of operations remains unchanged, but in Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu, it feels like a constant sauna and germs are dangerously impairing the stamina and readiness of

my Africans. What some might consider comfort, is none other than the ability to stay standing and therefore to carry out one's mission.

Bringing together experts in health, safety, infrastructure, and other fields, the goal of our meeting is to identify weaknesses and the solutions we can implement with the resources at our disposal and with help from Bamako. Very quickly, we identify a need for cleaner toilets, for water distribution, and a better organization for communal facilities (showers, washing machines, and air-conditioning), especially since the number of units often changes and the spread of germs is certainly favored by flies and the evening wind that blows through the airport. Measures are taken in this sense with an eye on treating all units fairly, even if some are better equipped because of their logistical vocation. An effort is made on the toilet facilities, a kind of chemical toilet that the Malian maintenance company has difficulty maintaining and emptying properly. We have to go into detail and check everything. Everyone is reminded about cleanliness measures, washing hands and food tins, and the rules against buying snacks or grilled meats from vendors near the observation posts. All avenues are explored and the epidemic starts to stabilize before subsiding slightly.

After the sole-less shoes of the Adrar, the urgent matter at hand is putting an end to the stomach flu outbreak. I remain behind with my two doctors to try to find out more. They, too, are looking at all ways possible to reduce the number of sick people. They know that the water from the Niger River is contaminated and therefore needs to be over-chlorinated. They decide to send samples to France to check the dangerousness of the germs, leaving no stone unturned in the face nonstop consultations and hospitalizations. One of them stares at me and frankly admits that he has not excluded cholera as the culprit, based on what he is seeing. The word is out. The harm is not certain, but the situation is serious. We decide not to talk about it and to wait for the test results. I find myself alone in the meeting tent. Orders are given. Cholera, one of my first memories, that of my little brother, unconscious, totally dehydrated in a matter of days, and isolated in a plastic bubble in a Parisian hospital. This vision from my childhood haunts me. He was narrowly saved by a military doctor who was able to diagnose the disease in time and made the connection with his godfather's recent visit to an infectious disease ward where there was an identical case. A bad memory that I do not care to relive with these men and women I am responsible for, not after such a long journey and so close to returning home.

Three days later, the two doctors confirm to me that the analysis is negative and that, probably due to the combination of all the measures

taken, general vigilance, and leaders' insistence, hospital admissions are decreasing. In retrospect, the fear of an epidemic may seem difficult to understand, seen from a Western country. Yet the risk is always taken very seriously by our medical corps, which has not forgotten all of the deaths they have caused during operations, specifically in Africa. In Madagascar, in 1895, the Duchesne expedition lost nearly 40% of its troops to disease (5,756 out of 15,000 men) whereas only 25 soldiers were killed in combat. The health of my great-grandfather, a colonial artilleryman, remained diminished until his death.

On the evening of April 15th, I am invited to dinner by Gougeon, his captains, and his CP officers. His two cooks have prepared an extraordinary meal with their field rations, a few onions, and a lot of imagination and culinary flair. The surprise at the end of the meal is the ice-cold dessert, which unfortunately has no taste. It is none other than a colored ice cube. While savoring the meal, I cannot help but congratulate the two master chefs, under their tent full of crates, water packs, and rudimentary utensils. Another successful hack! The will to do well and surpass oneself, even if it's just a field ration we are talking about, is something undeniably French.

Tuesday, April 16

Operations in Tessalit, Kidal, and Gao

Alexandre Van Dooren was killed in action a month ago. His CAT is on its way out. This morning, a mass is being celebrated in his memory at 7 am in the meeting area surrounded by the square tents. There are several Porpoises from the 1st but they are not the only ones present.

Three of the four planned operations are underway: Ametettai in the North, the Greater Gao, and Abeibara. The raid on Lake Faguibine will begin later, when I can guarantee sufficient support and once our allies have taken their bearings at the airport in Timbuktu. The Tessalit squadron, which left the day before, has reached the Garage junction at the entrance to the valley and has just found more than 20 cases of ammunition, probably not discovered during last month's search. They are supported by mortars and armed helicopters ready to open fire if they encounter the enemy. At the same time, the Bisons continue their mission of verifying nomadic camps after finding an explosive device, which was quickly neutralized, in their bivouac area.

For their part, after a final briefing at the brigade CP, Bert left and has reached an intermediate zone by evening, between Djebok and the target,

with his two AIFV companies. Tonight, the Tessalit and Kidal units will be back in their camps. We will be able to concentrate our support on the Niger bend for successive efforts in Sémit and soon Faguibine Lake. I look at the map. I imagine the captains giving their orders in the four corners of Mali and I smile thinking about the old Malian sergeant major at the northern checkpoint in Gao, the children at the foosball table, and the smiling girls in Timbuktu.

Absolutely excellent!

The brigade has been criss-crossing Mali for three months. For lack of enemies, fighting is rare. We have little news from the rear. Mail and packages arrive depending on the space available in the logistics convoys from Bamako. We know from the journalists and the few visitors that people back in France generally approve of the operation and our politicians. Denis enters the small office, smiling, with a newspaper in his hand: "Look, Bernard, it's not every day that we get to read this from the Americans." Michael Sheehan's sentence is indeed unambiguous: "What the French Army is doing in Mali is absolutely excellent!" Our allies have been providing us with substantial logistical support since the beginning of the operation, not visible at the brigade level, but very real in terms of tanker aircraft, wide-body aircraft, and intelligence support from drones. These two words "absolutely excellent" go around the units and cheer up the troops.

Like every morning, we meet with our Malian friends. They are smiling. The previous day's raid was a great success, especially since they actually recognized the IED bomber, who had been wanted for weeks in the region. A little later, Senior Colonel Dacko joins me with his deputy commanders and about 40 of his Tuareg guides. These men accompanied us, guided us in the North, and we would like to thank them. After reading a statement of recognition for them, I give each of them a copy and we toast to friendship. They are modest, humble people and only want to be reunited with their families who have been isolated in the North or are refugees in neighboring countries. I recognize a good number of them, having met them when the convoys arrived or in the Tessalit camp with their Kalashnikovs and scarves on their heads. The morning is spent working on human resources, monitoring the disengagement, and getting updates on current operations. Paris warns me about recent changes made to the upcoming 14th of July parade in Paris. The changes will put our brigade in the spotlight, now that we are sure to be home before June.

In Timbuktu, the handover between the French captain and the Burkinabé commander is proceeding well. The officer was trained at

Saint-Cyr. His troop is well commanded and looks sharp. The Porpoises have cleared their quarters to make room for the allied battalion. They will leave in 48 hours for Operation Farada: Goundam and Faguibine. In the meantime, some vehicles and their turrets still need to be repaired. The Tessalit squadron took the machine gun crates and returned them to the Malians. They left the entrance to the Ametettai after destroying two old jihadist vehicles, parked in the Garage. They did not come into contact with the enemy. They will reach Tessalit by nightfall.

Together with their Chadian allies, the Bisons in Kidal continue their reconnaissance in the Abeibara area. They will be back tomorrow. It is clear that despite the speed of operations currently underway to surprise the enemy, they are nowhere to be found and seem to have left the area or are refusing to put up a fight. These operations keep the pressure up throughout the country, allowing Malian units to resume large-scale operations in the South and for all of us to clean out the AQIM and MUJWA bunkers. The local population is more active than ever in these operations, judging by the quality of the intel they provide to the Franco-Malian patrols.

April 17th is almost quiet, mostly spent on HR work, a farewell toast with my Bigors from CAT 3, those from the Adrar. They don't know it, but their insignia is still inside my beret. Their artillery fire, and that of the African artillerymen in the Niger bend further south, killed our enemy and saved the lives of our infantrymen. In the Tigharghar and Greater Gao, the katibas were located and destroyed by these men who are now on their way home. They will follow in the footsteps of Desmeulles and Gèze's battalions, which have already reached France. Some of them will be at the Champs-Élysées parade on the 14th of July and they will have earned this honor.

Thursday, April 18

The Gauls find a terrorist training camp

Operation Obiou has been underway since the day before yesterday. Informed by search and intel teams, CAT 2's AIFVs and 200 Malians on the flanks approached, sealed off all the exits, and encircled the great wadi of Sémit. Before they fled, a dozen suspicious pickups were intercepted, some of which were neutralized and the rest returned to the villagers. Under these circumstances, it becomes difficult to determine what constitutes terrorist actions. The presence of Malian police becomes indispensable to avoid any blunders. Still wearing helmets and bulletproof vests, the infantrymen disembark and methodically search the wadi under a blazing sun.

I take a Puma to meet them early in the morning with my chief of staff. We fly over the Greater Gao: "*a mineral and sandy region with large wadis dotted with bushes, combat dugouts, and caches*." The AIFVs surround the wadi. Both captains know that the enemy could show up at any moment. The configuration was the same during the Doro operations. They are quick when maneuvering to close off escape routes, but cautious when on foot. Under the bushes, we find a terrorist training camp: a well-camouflaged empty container, combat dugouts, a heavy machine gun mount for pickups, and corrugated sheets to camouflage from aircraft. Some are even installed on vehicles and covered with plants or have sand glued onto them using diesel fuel, to avoid being detected by the thermal cameras of drones and aircraft.

My combat engineers from the 31st are hard at work. They use shovels to dig out the sand in a suspicious-looking place and find a trove of treasures: dozens of rounds of ammunition, 130 mm rockets, 23 mm and 107 mm shells. I get in closer and see the ramifications of Sahelian jihadism. On the crates, we see written "Tripoli" and "Benghazi." A 50-gallon drum is buried nearby. This is clearly a depot, like other depots, to supply explosives and fuel to terrorist pickups. After the fighting, it will still take time to neutralize these caches and the survivors, who have reverted to asymmetric warfare: mined roads, assassinations, and suicide bombings. We have entered a new phase since the attack in Kidal. The brigade will naturally give way to lighter units, adapted to tracking down isolated individuals, destroying small depots we uncover through intel work, and supporting and reinforcing Malian and UN forces.

When I return to my CP in Gao, I am told as the Puma is landing that CAT 2 has just discovered several weapons in a small village: machine guns, Kalashnikovs, grenades, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. The Malians took three prisoners. In the North, the squadron returned to check a pickup truck hit by an air strike.

Operation Farada: in the footsteps of Joffre

In Timbuktu, the squadron has finally left the airport for Goundam where it will set up a refueling pad for the helicopters we send them. The beginning of Farada, his operation in Faguibine, is conducted with the Burkinabés who have now taken over protection and patrols in Timbuktu. With the exception of the base guards and the departing soldiers waiting for their plane to Bamako, all the units are outside, far from the miasma of the camp. This frantic pace, which began in January, will continue until our departure in early May. However, to an outsider, the number of troops

still seems large and it takes a lot of effort to explain that the units are stretched to the limits of their capacities.

This is a well-known fact. With distance, suspicion has an insidious tendency to replace trust. Fortunately, the close relationship between the three heads of the vertical decision-making chain from the OCCC to Bamako and Gao helped clear up certain misunderstandings, clarify or verify certain orders or requests and, at all times, agree on the objectives to be achieved, the course of action to be taken, and the resources to be provided. At a time of great strain on manpower and operations and team fatigue, I knew that I was not alone, with all three of us working at our own level to turn tactical success into political and economic success. Grégoire was fighting other battles to ensure the democratic process would move forward and make sure the MINUSMA would get off the ground as quickly as possible, while keeping the Malians and the NMLA from reopening old quarrels. Our operations were on different levels but complementary, and he delegated the tactical responsibility I needed to accomplish my mission to the very end.

This evening, my communications officer brings me an article published by the newspaper *La Montagne* in Clermont-Ferrand. It tells the news of the brigade and of the 92nd in Mali with beautiful photos sent from Gao. Articles like these keep the people of Auvergne in touch with their army that has been engaged for three months now. As usual, *La Montagne* faithfully tells the stories of its soldiers. The bonds of trust created over time with the editor, Philippe Rousseau, and journalists like Rémi Bouquet des Chaux, give us the chance to publicize our actions and our daily life in the regional press. While they may not have not been able to join us in Mali, they will be among the faithful waiting for us when we return.

At 5 pm, my Catalan NCO comes to get me in my little office. He is accompanied by three other soldiers from the same region, all of different ranks. One of them has a relative on the editorial team of the newspaper *L'Indépendant* and we had the idea of making a humorous photo, representing the five of us with the red and yellow-colored Catalan flag in front of CAT 2's AIFVs, which we do with big grins on our faces. The photo will be published a few days later in the Eastern Pyrenees region of France. I was amused to discover this article, thinking of my in-laws living in Prats-de-Mollo and my ancestor, Pierre Barrera, a journalist during the French Revolution and Napoleon's rule, one of the founders of *L'Indépendant.*

Friday, April 19 to Sunday, April 21

Departure of CAT 3

On April 19th, I salute one last time the Porpoises from CAT 3, Gougeon, and his Porpoises from the 1st and 2nd Mar Inf Rgts. CAT 3 no longer exists. From now on, only CAT 2 and the HU, which has just been relieved, are all that's left in Mali. We are back to the force we started with, only three months after the capture of Timbuktu. This campaign has been a wild ride from start to finish. Captain Gregory's Camels tell me that they are happy to say goodbye to the edge of the runway in Gao, where the asphalt accumulates heat all day long. This heat, the noise of the planes at night, the frequency of guard duty, and the stomach flu outbreak have worn them out. I'm back with this team with whom I've shared everything since the start, from the Niger River to the Adrar. They too will be justly commended for their achievements.

Operations continue. CAT 2 unearths some aircraft bombs, radio sets, and weapons, before returning to Gao on April 20th. The Seahorse Squadron and its helicopters continue toward Fabiguine, an area sullied by bandits and extortionist roadblocks. The columns of vehicles advance rapidly through the small villages which are relieved to see us coming.

I join them by Puma on the morning of the 20th. I find their captain who is happy to have left Timbuktu after more than two months of isolation and attacks. His men are strong, but they are worn out and you can see it in their faces. The platoons resemble their commanders more than ever. Two of the three lieutenants have been wounded and evacuated in the past two months. Their executive warrant officers replaced them as per the regulations.

After Fabiguine, it will be time to bring the squadron back to Gao, especially since the equipment is exhausted. It is much older than the people using it and will need a good technical inspection upon its return.

Night falls on Gao. The Tigers and Pumas are parked in front of the tower. The Communications Company opened a meeting tent for the CP staff in the evening. Beers and cans of soda arrive regularly from Bamako. It is the perfect occasion to meet with my Africans from Clermont-Ferrand in a quiet place.

This team lives in unison, with rigor and relaxation, humility and efficiency, just like Claude, my chief of staff. As I take the time to talk to them individually, I also realize how fortunate we are to share this military life, a life of greatness and service, of respect and common values. I see my

air officer smiling. I have a surprise in store for him: in front of his peers, I offer him the fin of one of the three bombs dropped on February 27th on Le Garage, a piece recovered by the Porpoises of CAT 3.

The 21st is mostly spent on administrative tasks. In the morning, as will often be the case in the days to come, a regional authority lands whom I welcome off the plane, before they review the Malian or AFISMA troops.

The Crocos of Tessalit come to greet me before leaving for Paphos and Angoulême. The camp is emptying out and the epidemiological risk is receding. CAT 2 comes to give us its report on Operation Obiou: the figures, the assessment of the situation, the state of personnel and equipment. The infantrymen are resilient and have held up well despite a few heat waves. In the evening, we are invited with Denis and the commander of the Franco-Malian LU for tea with Dacko and his subordinates. The fire lights up everyone's faces. A deep friendship has developed over the past three months, especially with Denis, who led the Doro operations from Gao with our allies. In the end, the discussions are of little importance. We are together side by side, a glass of green tea in hand. The sky is a dazzling array of infinite stars. The Malians know that we are going to leave, that they are going to have to change teams, rebuild bonds of trust, and that they will probably not have the same experiences. Politics has taken over and their objective is to go north into NMLA controlled land. It is their country and regaining territorial integrity induces the presence of armed forces and administration, but, given the situation, it seems wise to define the political modalities, which Grégoire is actively working on in close liaison with Ambassador Huberson, the Malian government, and the Malian general staff.

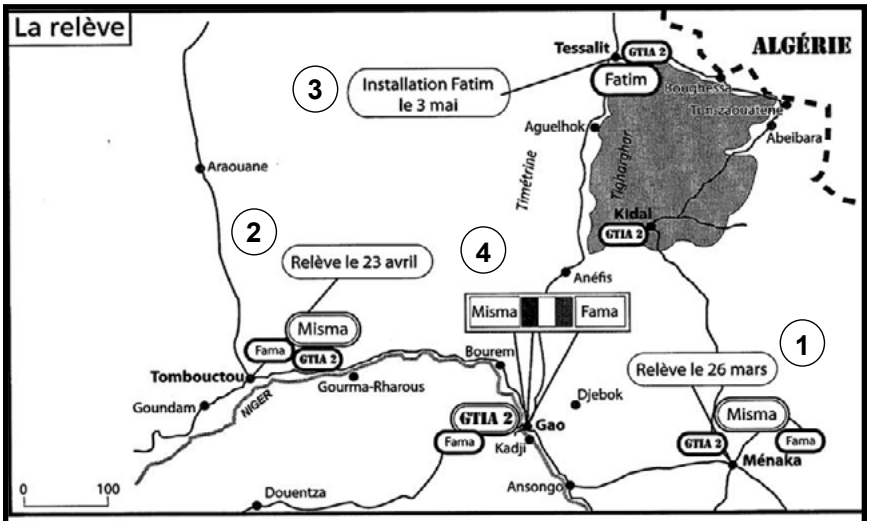
Monday, April 22 to Thursday, April 25

Last major operation in the Greater Gao

Daily meetings with our allies continue. Setting the stage for the future CP of the MINUSMA peacekeepers, AFISMA has set up a CP in Gao composed of officers from various African contingents. This arrangement will help get African battalions off the ground in Gao and later in the North. After a long journey west of Timbuktu, the squadron has returned to the airport. They had no contact with the terrorists, but their assessment of the situation is unambiguous. This area is riddled with bandits who attack herds and villages, even destroying the solar panels offered by NGOs to run the water pumps. Several villages have been deserted and black populations have regrouped west of Goundam to resist the aggressors. The reception was excellent everywhere. While reading the captain's report, I

feel like I am re-reading the report of Lieutenant-Colonel Joffre, written in 1894, denouncing the same fears the sedentary people held of the bandits and the peoples of the North.

The synchro matrix has become easier to manage over the past days. The outposts in Tessalit, Kidal, and Gao are guarded by a unit day and night. Units available for maneuvers are becoming scarcer and, as predicted earlier in the month, operations are being reduced to more limited patrols. CAT 2 still has its two AIFV companies and we decide on a final operation before one of them is withdrawn. Operation Okello will start on the 25th in a more remote area, known to the Gauls. The aim will be to make a large visible loop encompassing Imenas, Talataye, and In Delimane, stopping here and there over the course of several days, supported by helicopters, artillery, and combat engineers just in case. Four days will be devoted to this special operation.



1. Relief in place. 26 March.
2. Relief in place. 23 April.
3. Relief in place. 3 May.
4. FATIM: Forces Armées Tchadiennes en Intervention au Mali (Chadian Armed Forces intervening in Mali).
   Fama: Forces armées maliennes (Malian Armed Forces).
   Misma: Mission Internationale de soutien au Mali (International Support mission to Mali – African CEDEAO led).

Figure 15. Relief in Place. Created by Jean-Luc Bodet.

At the same time, on the 23rd, the guard of Timbuktu is officially entrusted to the Burkinabés in the presence of Grégoire and the general commanding AFISMA. This handover took place barely 100 days after

we were put on alert in Clermont-Ferrand. It took only 100 days to liberate Mali and welcome our African colleagues. The next day, the squadron's Seahorses reached Gao, after a new journey of more than 300 miles.

The different detachments take advantage of the last days before their departure to regroup between two guard shifts or between two patrols and to celebrate St. George's Day for the cavalry or to gather for a photo, as the combat engineers do on their return from Kidal and Timbuktu.

My civil-military affairs team is conscientiously and effectively continuing its projects for the people of Gao: neighborhood meetings, the resumption of internal dialogue, the re-establishment of local radio and, above all, the restoration of the covered market and outdoor shops, which were destroyed by terrorists during the February 21st attack on the city. The inauguration is scheduled for the 25th. During this period, I receive the Muslim chaplain on tour in Gao. He was present in Timbuktu on February 2nd. Smiling, he has just come from a pleasant meeting with the locals, before seeing the units and soldiers of all faiths one more time.

On the evening of the 24th, for the first time since December 2012, I meet up with my five colonels, the regimental commanders of France's 3rd Brigade, one of whom—the one from Brive—managed to come for a few days to see his Bisons in Kidal. Gougeon, who saw his units off, is still in Gao. With the chief of staff, everyone from the command team of the 3rd is here, except for Hubert, my executive officer back in Clermont-Ferrand. We talk about the calendar of events for the next three months, our return to France and the change of command, the military term for the official ceremonies when colonels change within the regiments. Three of these ceremonies are scheduled for July. We also discuss arrangements for the 14th of July parade and, just before that, the official ceremony to disband the Serval Brigade scheduled at the end of June in Clermont-Ferrand. This gives everyone a chance to make plans knowing full well where I need to be and when as soon as we get back to France. After some reflection, I add to these formal meetings a small ceremony in Marseilles to celebrate, on our return from Mali, the 70th anniversary of the creation of our brigade by General de Monsabert, liberator of the city of Marseilles. I had given up on this ceremony when I left for Africa. In the end, I decide to maintain it, but with few people: only my command team with me in the room, this small family of six colonels, and their color guards, but no units to avoid transport and accommodation problems.

On the morning of the 25th, CAT 2 is on its way to Okello. The seven of us meet before it leaves and my team is split up again. My communica-

tions officer wants to immortalize this meeting: facing the camera, we put our arms on each other's shoulders to form the pack of the 3rd, the united team of the Monsabert Brigade.

Afterwards, I head to the city center to attend the inauguration of the market, the Gao Halls, in the presence of the mayor and the governor, the prefect, an enthusiastic population, and a folk music group. The authorities' speeches all emphasize the role of Serval, a word that is always warmly applauded. The visit is quick, but dozens of hands are outstretched to try to shake mine amidst the laughter and thanks. The local economy is picking up again.

I see mango sellers sitting alongside the roads. Their fruits look like the ones in Bamako, not like the ones we have in the camp. On my return, I summon the head of procurement to bluntly point this out. We are still eating rations and the kitchens will open after we leave. If he can't get anything better from Bamako, I urge him to go and see what is available in the market and not just accept what the traders want to supply us with, which are obviously second pickings. The ones we are being delivered look like "*dog mangoes*." I call them that because they look more like skin on bones than fruit. The next day, the soldiers in the camp will receive real mangoes, but, to my great regret, no additional green veggies.

In the evening, we prepare for the visit of the Minister of Defense, the second one after his visit on March 7th in the Ametettai. The day after, the Chair of the Defense Committee at the National Assembly, Patricia Adam, will visit accompanied by a delegation of parliamentarians.

Friday, April 26

Jean-Yves Le Drian's visit to Gao

It's 5 am, and I am up early again. The walls remain hot all night, the camp never really cools off. I have coffee with my Bison commander from the 126th, before he leaves for Brive. A solid colonel whom I have valued for 20 years now. He was part of my operations leadership team for the 92nd Inf Rgt in Mitrovica in 2000.

9 am. The minister arrives via Transall, and I welcome him as he steps off the aircraft, accompanied by the ambassador, a Saint-Cyrien from the year before me who has changed careers. He is a pleasant and pragmatic man. As a senior cadet, he hazed me in the Breton moors of Coëtquidan more than 30 years ago. It's not something you easily forget! The delegation includes Grégoire, Dembélé, and the Nigerian general in charge of the AFISMA, plus some civilian VIPs and military officers.

The minister is smiling and shakes my hand enthusiastically. This time I am receiving him in the South and, since our last meeting, the Adrar has been purged of terrorists.

We give him an update on the situation in the CP meeting tent. He is perfectly aware of the situation, but he is interested in the perception out in the field and my intelligence officer gives him some insights and keys to understanding that he takes the time to clarify. There is a good rapport between the two men: the one a tenacious Breton, a man of the field, and the other a son of Lozère, pragmatic and perceptive. They will meet again on July 13th at the ministry.

At the end of the meeting, the same officer presents the brigade's intel resources, the specialized search teams, and our African artillerymen, one of whose batteries is specialized in tactical electromagnetic eavesdropping, mini-drones, and dialogue with the local population. In a few minutes, the commanders and soldiers show him how they prepare the objective files for operations (photos, outlines of the enemy) and how they are put to use in battle to ensure the enemy's destruction. One sergeant plays a track of jihadists speaking Arabic and Tamasheq; another shows him a mini-drone film on a small screen depicting enemy combatants moving behind a low wall in the Ametettai before they are spotted and destroyed by artillery fire! Combined with the higher-level assets, the brigade was able to stay one step ahead and most of the time "see beyond the hill," as military weapons engineers say. These teams, with their tactical resources specific to the army and the brigade, were the armed wing of the intelligence office and its general. Just like the new equipment—AIFVs, Tiger helicopters, and Caesar howitzers—they also saved lives in our ranks and ensured our victory. The visit ends with a meeting with our Malian and African allies, my morning correspondents. They confirm to the minister the pressure put on their forces by the NMLA, which is increasing their area of influence and moving ever closer to Niger on the former stomping grounds of the MUJWA.

"Monsabert's spirit is still with us"

The minister ends with a speech addressed to the units present under the meeting area tents. He praises the brigade, its leader, and its men: "I would also like to extend my warmest congratulations to General Barrera, who led the brigade in this maneuver with admirable composure and determination. Two months ago, we spoke of General de Monsabert, his tactical sense and his energy in leading his men to victory. It's obvious to me that his spirit is still with the 3rd Mechanized Brigade."

The men are smiling. This visit is appreciated. French and Malian soldiers take pictures. I meet up with a few journalists I've met several times since January, including Pierre Julien from RTL. His father belonged to the 4th Tunisian Skirmisher Regiment, the one that took part in the battles of Belvedere and Garigliano. We raise our glasses of water in memory of the Army of Africa. General Dembélé is reunited with his subordinates and his ever-growing number of men in Gao. He is wearing his checkered scarf. He is frank and speaks the words of a soldier. We exchange friendly words before the minister and his delegation depart in a Transall.

Claude had prepared this visit well, like an operation, and I congratulate the teams who clearly presented their points of view and their equipment. The sequence continues. I have to return to the North to welcome the parliamentarians there at dawn. My intention is to spend the evening with the Roosters Squadron which was tasked with returning to the Ametettai Valley and patrolling the Adrar. Unfortunately, the Puma from Tessalit is still being repaired, and I will have to make do with a later take-off. We will have to stay in the camp, far from the Mar Tnk Inf Rgt Porpoises and the Ametettai.

We have to designate those who will parade in Paris

Frédéric, my human resources captain has a smile. He has just received the validations of 20 individual decorations to be distributed in Gao. I regret that CAT 3 has already left. We will reserve these medals for the soldiers of CAT 2, the only ones still present at this time, but currently out in the field. Paris calls me to confirm that the brigade will march at the head of the troops. The person I am speaking with asks me which units to showcase. My answer is simple: the staff in front, mainly the 3rd brigade, followed by the paratroopers of the 11th and attached elements, my air officer who will march in the front row, my legal officer, and those who contributed to our success in the shadows. In front of them, my deputy commander Denis, my chief of staff Claude and those from the forward CP in the North: Xavier and Laurent, the architects of our victory. Just behind them, the colonels who commanded the five battalions: the four CATs, the HU and, in protocol order, the 92nd Inf Rgt (CAT 2), the 1st and 21st Mar Inf Rgt (CATs 3 and 1), CAT 4 (2nd Foreign Legion Para Rgt) and the 5th Cmb Hel Rgt (HU). I would like to associate the two other ground force regiments that do not belong to the brigade, but without which nothing could have been accomplished: the 28th Comm Rgt stationed in Issoire (the communications group) and the 511th Transportation Regiment (logistics battalion), commanded by Colonel Jean-Louis Velut. Later, the 2nd Foreign Legion Para Rgt will be

taken out of the Serval Brigade to parade with the other Foreign Legion regiments, as the 2013 parade is also celebrating their 150th anniversary. In the end, six colonels and flags from Operation Serval will march behind the brigade commander and his colors.

In the afternoon, between two meetings, I review the current operations. CAT 2 has passed Djebok. They are in back in the area that was searched during the Doro operations. Both AIFVs companies are diminished. They had to leave sections behind to protect the outpost. Gustav had 1,000 men, Okello just over 500, but still had all the capabilities not to be taken by surprise: infantry, helicopters, howitzers, and combat engineers to clear mines, who will ultimately come in handy. Locals again tell infantrymen of traps set by individuals on both roads. Two IEDs are defused. Searches uncover more boxes of ammunition, communications equipment, and hundreds of new, well-camouflaged uniforms. Armed helicopters are on the ground in a circle on the Gao runway. The CAT will travel more than 370 miles in the Southern Zone.

Before taking off, my communications officer introduces me to Laurent Larcher, a journalist with the newspaper *La Croix*, waiting at the base of the tower. He is looking to report on the brigade's engagements. On a whim and without any preferential treatment, I offer to take him with me to Tessalit, then to Okello. He keeps to himself and, with great finesse, will publish very accurate articles on the situation in Mali and the ongoing operations. We take off late for Tessalit where I find my camp, without my CAT from the Adrar, an impression of emptiness "*unlike when the G08 FCP was here and during the offensive against the jihadist groups*." Major André is keeping his detachment together. He has just spent two years in the Pacific and laughs with the serenity of all the old troopers as he tells me all it takes is imaging the sand is sea and the reflexes remain the same. His TOC is activated, but it is no longer a brigade forward CP and the enemy has disappeared, most of them having been destroyed the previous month.

Saturday, April 27

Our parliamentarians in Tessalit and Gao

It's 4 am and hot already. My tendinitis helped to wake me up again. The sun rises in the same place as it did every morning I spent thinking about my men who were engaged on the other side of the mountain. The Soviet howitzer is still there at the base of the flagpole. A light wind rattles the field hospital tents. I walk around the camp thinking of the last three months and the Africans engaged in their last major operation. I think back to the FRAGOs, always asking myself the same question, "Did I forget

anything?" It's 7 am, I see my washroom, on its four wheels, still in the same place. I show it to Laurent Larcher with a smile, and we talk about the events of the previous month in Tessalit over a canteen cup of coffee, sharing a few dry cakes while waiting for the parliamentarians' Transall. The aluminum cup fits into the aluminum canteen. Covered with green fabric, they are worn on a belt. They have followed me everywhere since Saint-Cyr. Everything else in the pack has changed over the past 30 years, except the canteen and the black leather boots.

The Transall lands at 8 am, and I welcome Patricia Adam and a dozen parliamentarians, who are kind and considerate. We introduce them to the site before explaining the taking of the Ametettai on the map. I plan to fly them over the combat zone so that they can see the distances covered and the conditions of engagement. Members of the Defense Committee are familiar with military operations and matters. They are fully involved in ongoing discussions, reforms, and the drafting of the military spending bill. This visit, like others, should allow them to assess the level of readiness of our forces and the adequacy of the budget allocated to the armed forces with regard to the missions the country has entrusted them with. Their questions are specific and targeted. They know the different branches, their capabilities, their difficulties, their motivations, and their commitments. Most of them have already been to Afghanistan or to other theaters. Flying over the area reminds them of the vastness of the northern provinces, the difficulty of the terrain, and the omnipresence of this unforgettable heat. We fly over "*the area in a maneuvering helicopter, accompanied by a Tiger: the entrance of the valley, the Garage, the Ametettai, where the armored squadron and its infantry section are currently located, then the cave of Corporal Charenton and then back to base*." The flyover was long, but informative. We leave by Transall for Gao where Denis is waiting for us.

The tour continues in AIFVs around and in the city where a section is conducting a foot patrol at the market. The population is welcoming, the children full of life. Young people tell us that they want to work again as guides for tourists. In the camp, the delegation meets with the Malian authorities (prefect, governor, military, and police). We end with a toast to friendship shared with the soldiers. The chairwoman gives a congratulatory speech "*and presents me the medal of the National Assembly insisting on the admiration for our mission accomplished*." Well informed, we celebrate the birthday of one of the parliamentarians with a large chocolate cake, which provokes a general uproar of laughter. Soldiers appreciate the simplicity and attention the parliamentarians bestow on them.

In the evening, Captain Bodet, my imagery officer who has been dutifully following me everywhere since the beginning, comes to greet me. He is passing a kidney stone and has to be evacuated to France quickly. Several people will have the same problem during the last few weeks. It's sad to have to leave the team so quickly, and for such a reason. I salute him and bid him farewell. No one is indispensable on this Earth. He must think of his family and take care of himself, especially since he will have to go through a lot more suffering before he is well again. Before leaving the overheated office, he comes out and hands me a white stick. "*He offers me a simple wooden cane from Tessalit, a soldier's gift, handmade and from the heart.*" The stick is thin and as hard as iron. Trees are rare in Tessalit. It is a shepherd's cane without bark, without embellishments, the opposite of the one from Bamako. Since then, the two have become inseparable.

Sunday, April 28 to Thursday, May 2

The endurance of infantrymen in overheated wadis

The brigade continues its last Okello operation in the Greater Gao before CAT 2 is withdrawn. Our verifications in the villages of Talataye on the 28th and In Delimane the following day, both market days, reveal that this area, formerly identified as MUJWA, is now under NMLA influence.

The flags are present in town and, on two occasions, demonstrations of about 50 children and women are organized, supervised by the same men on foot or on motorcycles. The population wears provocative signs for the Malian police who accompany our sections: "France with the NMLA" or "Long live France, not Mali." Our patrols are careful to stay away from these demonstrations to avoid media coverage. Moreover, the situation is tense and confusing as we have received reports that some terrorists are in the area. The Gauls remain vigilant.

On the 30th, I take a Puma to see Colonel Bert and his captains' position, facing In Delimane, then stop at his logistics base a few miles back. The infantrymen are searching wadis on foot, followed by their AIFV like they did during Doro. The heat is hard to bear under the weight of their protective gear. I join a group in an AIFV where I come across combat engineers who have taken a short break from their APC to go from 117 °F to the 99° F ambient temperature in the air-conditioned AIFV.

Under these conditions, the options afforded by the new equipment are not a luxury. My Africans confirm what I already knew. They prefer to be in the field rather than in Gao. The two captains have gained a lot of experience in three months. They command calmly and their units—the

Raptors and the Grumblers—maneuver quickly and efficiently. They are accompanied by a so-called observation APC, its crew being in charge of regulating artillery fire at the front. I recognize the warrant officer from the 68th Afr Arty Rgt. His vehicle is equipped with a simple machine gun, optics, and powerful communications equipment. Sitting in the vehicle, he tells me about Doro and how he used his weapon to destroy—fewer than 400 yards away—the terrorists who tried to approach his vehicle with Kalashnikovs and anti-tank weapons. The combat exercises paid off again, especially as he was in charge of calling in artillery fire in the wadi, to support the infantrymen of CAT 2: the same combined arms combat as in the Adrar. Captain Jean-Baptiste and his Raptors replicated in Doro the firing sequences they had trained to do at the Canjuers camp last June and on the Larzac infantry courses, with the support of helicopters and airplanes as well.

The Gauls take advantage of the respite to clean their weapons and continue their investigations. In one of the AIFV turrets, a sergeant explains to a young corporal how to use his on-board gun just in case, a precaution that can come in handy when things go south. This was the case for Robert Pellet, someone I met 20 years ago. Left untreated, this soldier from the 2nd Battalion of chasseurs lost his sight while being held as a POW in Germany. A true patriot, the man had not forgotten his training as a pointer for a 25 mm anti-tank gun back in 1940. He had not made the cut as a gunner but he knew how to fire it and it saved his life. Deployed with his small gun to Faissault south of Rethel, he found himself confronted one morning by Guderian's Panzers in the main street of the village. The only survivor of a direct hit, Pellet managed to reset his gun and single-handedly destroyed three tanks at very close range before disappearing into a burning field of wheat as his gun was crushed under the tracks and sheer mass of the 4th tank. The anti-tank pointer reached the French lines, found another gun, and destroyed three more tanks at Mourmelon before being taken prisoner. On his return from captivity, Warrant Officer Jeanson, the battalion's first decorated soldier in 1914, was waiting for him at the train station. He presented him with his own military medal for his heroic acts. Before he died, in the solitude of his retirement home in the suburbs of Paris, the old man asked me to pay him a last visit in the uniform of an officer of the 2nd Battalion of chasseurs . He reached out his hands and grabbed hold of my jacket, then symbolically pinned on it the medal of the two heroes as a testimony to history and to our friendship, a bond between soldiers. He shook my hand, then my forearm and without seeing me simply said: "Captain, we fought in '40, we did our duty." He

was right. In five weeks of terrible fighting, France lost more than 100,000 men, more than any battle in World War I in such a short time. Robert has since joined his fellow soldiers from Faissault and even though they have never met, the attentive corporal I see will know how to use his superior's chain gun just in case.

I go to the logistics base, and the AIFVs line up to refuel. The Gazelles are near the mechanics for the night. The recovery team includes automotive specialists from all five regiments of the brigade, as in Afghanistan two years ago. The cohesion of the brigade occurs in the field, during operations. Nearby, the Caesars of the Afr Arty Rgt are on standby, ready to support the company as it completes its search of the wadi a few miles away. Always lively and in good spirits, Captain Benoit has served two tours in Kapisa with his artillerymen. I recognize the sergeant and his team, who showed off their howitzer to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense in December 2012 in Clermont-Ferrand, making it clear that they were ready for Guepard. They were not lying.

Incidents between the NMLA and the Malian police

Our Malian allies are integrated into our system. The police know the area well. Some of them are from the area. An incident occurs late in the afternoon: we see a pickup full of Malian soldiers speeding away and crossing the logistic base before passing to the other side of a promontory. They have just observed light NMLA vehicles with flags displayed less than 500 yards away. They are not the type of people to let this provocation stand. A French patrol reacts quickly to stop them and dissuade them from firing. These actions put "*the guides in a situation of tension and we are at the limits of our mission*." On May 1st, the Gauls continue their searches in a nearby wadi. They will return on the 2nd, after a week on the road. They observed the omnipresence of the NMLA in this region formerly occupied by the MUJWA, but also the abundance of this area so close to Niger. There are many traders, and cows, horses, and goats number into the thousands around the camps and villages, unlike in the North.

At the same time, this period is marked by other inspections and visits by the armed forces, which aim to take stock of the support and health situation, particularly in Gao. The reorganization work is progressing at the same pace as the mess hall and toilet buildings, which should be ready by the end of May. In the meantime, the camp has managed to organize itself in order to maintain its missions, while preventing men and equipment from getting too worn down. The lack of air-conditioning and the lack of fresh food weighs on the ability of the units, without jeopardizing the latest operations.

The Malians announce and insist each day more than the previous that they intend to head north and set up base in Anefis, Kidal, and Tessalit. Their forces are growing by the day, and soon there will be several hundred of them, pre-positioned in Gao and the Menaka region, advancing along two different routes. Without logistical support, except for a few transports of fuel drums, and without air support, they know that victory is not guaranteed. The hostile Tuaregs of the North do not want either CAT 8's Imghad Tuaregs to return, nor the units from Bamako. We maintain constant contact with our liberation allies, but we explain to them that the time has come for politics rather than for weapons, which they understand internally, as they rush to continue making progress. The pressure exerted by the NMLA in the Greater Gao is intensifying and does not make life easier for us. The Malian leaders we meet are convinced that the jihadists have donned new clothes and are seeking to wipe the slate clean by defending the claims of the NMLA and displaying their flags. Dacko's subordinates show us jihadist propaganda films found in computers abandoned by the terrorists. They show the capture of Malian forts in the North, a mixture of singing, horseback riding, infantry assaults, and bearded terrorists: villains who destroy and build nothing. However, the images do not prove that there is collusion between the terrorists and the Tuareg independence fighters, even if they are convinced of it. Suspicion exists, but there is no evidence to support the alliance of the two. The NMLA made a pact with the devil in 2012, but soon found itself sidelined and betrayed by the jihadists, including Ansar Eddine, Ag Ghali's Tuareg jihadist movement. We imagine the North in the midst of a political reconfiguration and want to avoid at all costs the resumption of the old North-South conflicts, by continuing to hunt down the surviving terrorists, who have turned themselves into chameleons. After the East, the complicated South!

At the same time, my Chadian counterpart, who has just been appointed division general by President Déby, tells me that he intends to move his forces from Kidal to Aguelhok and on to Tessalit, where the living and security conditions are better. The map of our redeployed forces is taking shape.

On the evening of the 29th, the Le Guen family, arrested north of Timbuktu and held for the past few days in small isolated buildings in the camp, is evacuated to Bamako. As for "Djamel the Grenoblois," I did not want to see nor talk to him or to his family. This Frenchman has chosen the jihadist camp and, with his Moroccan wife, they lived in very rustic conditions, forcing their five children, aged from 2 to 9 years, to suffer an

indecent life, on the edge of constant heatstroke and dehydration. They will be safer in France.

On the same day, a special forces patrol ran over a mine near the Algerian border, where the armored vehicle had lost a wheel. One soldier was killed and two others were quickly evacuated by helicopter to Tessalit for treatment, and rescued by surgeons from the forward surgical team.

On the evening of the 29th, we get a copy of the main decisions of the upcoming military reform. The most memorable being the dissolution of one of the eight combined arms brigades and the downsizing of our forces by 24,000 men, in addition to the 54,000 that have already been planned and partly achieved. It is hard news to swallow; however, everyone knows that Serval has saved us from an even worse fate.

Camerone Night

On the evening of the 30th, Denis reminds us all of the sacrifices made by the legionnaires at Camerone, whose memory is celebrated every year by the Foreign Legion. After the evening briefing, he generously offers the CP and communicators a round of drinks to celebrate this African April 30th. Military celebrations are part of our DNA. They connect the past to the values of the present. We celebrate them on the anniversaries of battles like Camerone, Sidi Brahim for the light infantry, or Bazeilles for the colonials. Each branch celebrates its patron saint, and these celebrations are always an occasion to strengthen the bonds of the regimental family. They generally start with an official ceremony presided by the colonel, the review of the troops, the commemoration reading, and a minute of silence for our fallen. This is followed by a sports challenge between the units, then a meal bringing together the whole regiment. The day ends with the branch's and regiment's anthem, a solemn moment followed by the colonel's departure with everyone standing silently at attention.

If they were meaningless, these commemorations would soon turn into carnivals, pointless theater performances, activities of self-congratulation, and mutual admiration. This is not the case. These intimate ceremonies are intended for the military family. They are part of its culture, a culture of duty, honor, and courage. The main idea is not to participate, but to win by supporting your leaders and raising your flag, by defending your country, and saving your skin as well as your fellow soldiers'.

We end this evening in the intelligence officers' tent. Their leader, Lieutenant Colonel Alain, received a package from his wife with Auvergne cured meats. Not all of them made the trip unscathed, but we share them anyways, sitting on cots, talking about the Puy-de-Dôme and its cu-

linary specialties. The night before, we had taken the time to celebrate the birthdays of my driver and the sergeant major commanding the bodyguards with a drink and dinner at the base of the tower, facing the helicopters landing at night and excited about our imminent return home. Words didn't matter. We were together.

My chief of staff got a head start on my return schedule. During my first visit to Paris, he scheduled a visit to the Percy Hospital to greet the wounded who were still hospitalized. He is also preparing for our homecoming ceremony in Clermont-Ferrand at the end of June. Human resources are back at the center of our attention. Soon the next team will arrive in Gao, our CP will withdraw in small groups giving us time for a knowledge transfer and smooth transition. It's only a matter of days. We learn that the official transfer of authority will take place on May 11th, in ten days. I continue working on human resources and drafting the end-of-mission report, which I want to be as exhaustive as possible.

On Thursday, May 2nd, I connect via video conference for the weekly press briefing of the Ministry of Defense. I am introduced by Pierre Bayle, the Defense Information and Communications Officer. I give a quick overview of the situation before answering all the questions from the journalists, who are there every Thursday on Saint-Dominique Street. I know more than half of them from Timbuktu, Gao, and Tessalit. Their questions are direct, logical, and to the point: the succession, troop numbers, the relations on the ground between the Malians and the NMLA. Pierre Bayle extends his thanks to me, without either of us realizing that our destinies will soon cross paths again.

Friday, May 3 to Tuesday, May 7

Keep your guard up until the end

With the installation of the AFISMA CP in Gao and the arrival of African troops in the city, official visits are becoming more frequent, including the Guinean Minister of Defense on May 3rd and his Senegalese counterpart on May 7th.

Hundreds of Malian soldiers and dozens of pickups are waiting for orders to head north. The mayor invites me to the inauguration of the town hall annex, recently redone after it was damaged during the fighting in February. I listen to his speech, the governor's and the prefect's as well, the latter's being very polished and refined, reminding me of the French Third Republic. He reminds me of the governor of Abéché in Eastern Chad in 2004.

The market is back in full swing, and on my way out I head for the open-air stalls of the locals, to talk to them, see what they're selling and get a feel for the atmosphere, just as I did in Chad and Ivory Coast. I notice above all the availability of fruits and vegetables, but I am caught up by the mayor, obviously worried to see me talking freely with his constituents. I have no choice but to cut this visit short and return to the camp with some vegetables bought in a hurry from a cheerful old Malian woman. Seeing all these fruit and vegetables leads me to ask our food supply chain manager for more improvements, to provide the troops with much needed fresh produce.

Of course, there is no wholesaler on site, and we would have to go around buying what we need from women in the market, with the risk of drying up the vegetable supply for the local population. Sure, but I am responsible for these men and women and it is up to him to find solutions to provide fresh food to the units, in addition to the rations. This is what we agreed on before I left for Tessalit, and this is what I am still waiting for when I leave.

Operations are wound down after Okello. There are few units left in Gao. An outbreak of stomach flu has limited their ability to operate on site for a few days. This outbreak occurs despite the daily reminders about sanitary measures. "*The last days are always the most dangerous. Do not let your guard down.*" On the afternoon of May 4th, two suicide bombers in a vehicle blow themselves up in the middle of a group of Malian soldiers being trained, between Gao and Bourem. Two are killed and three wounded are evacuated and treated by us in Gao.

Sunday, May 5

Claude leaves to go to his daughter's wedding

I am up at 4 am. It's too hot to stay in bed in this building. Work starts an hour later on Sundays, and it has been like this for three weeks. This is our substitute for a weekly day of rest. Claude spends his last day in Gao. He didn't ask me, but I know his daughter's wedding is in the middle of the week. This time I did not consult him. I put him on a Transall the next day for Bamako, from where he will fly directly to France. He will arrive just in time to assume his role as a father. His executive officer, who has been his second-in-command for more than three months, will finish the job without difficulty. Until the end, he supervises and monitors his teams while sparing me the details, always mindful to let me know when real problems arise, when important decisions need to be made, and what carefully considered solutions he recommends. Until the end, he will take it

upon himself to maintain a constructive and objective dialogue, especially with his contact in Bamako, despite, at times, a certain lack of understanding linked to the distance and attempts at entryism. I accompany him to the door of the Transall with Denis and Rémi. We say few words. We owe him a lot. The day before, at the end of the evening briefing, the entire CP had stood up as one to applaud him, putting his usual modesty to shame. When he arrives in Bamako, Grégoire will receive him to thank him for his work.

On the evening of the 6th, we invite our loyal Malian counterparts. Dacko and his team, the African colonels of AFISMA, especially Gabriel the Nigerien, and those with whom we have shared so much since January. We do not talk about the NMLA, or even their preparations. We exchange a few gifts, but they, like us, know that the most important thing is invisible.

On the 7th at dawn, Bert invites me to his camp, surrounded by his remaining officers, a few non-commissioned officers, and Gauls. My replacement will be here soon, and he knows I'll be very busy with instructions. So now is the time to meet, without too much formality and pomp, to mark the end of joint operations. His little speech is simple and well received. He takes out an old straight-edged sword, covered with leather and multicolored threads. A Tuareg sword from the last century, found in a cache in Talataye along with some ammunition. As he rightly points out, it is the "symbol of victory, the sword of one's defeated enemy."

This gift is authentic, full of history and symbols, original, and suited to the situation, a beautiful mark of affection for a leader who is bound to his Gauls, his former tribe!

The last few days pass quickly and unfortunately I can't say hello to all the small cells in the camp. I take advantage of the last meals to invite my assistants, bodyguards, and command staff, but also the captains still present, those of Araouane and Talataye.

On the evening of the 7th, I meet up with the hussars in their tents: "*a soldier's night out, sharing a mango salad*."

The next day we will celebrate our victory. In the meantime, final orders must be given, instructions prepared, and human resources work completed. I meet with my key subordinates to give them their evaluations, as all leaders do at this time of year. Tomorrow night, my replacement will be in Gao.

Wednesday, May 8

Last day together

In the TOC, there is nothing to report. No rockets fired at the airport, no suicide bombers in Gao or Kidal. We will be able to gather the remaining troops to celebrate our victory in 1945 and congratulate the first decorated soldiers from Mali. I had imagined joining CAT 2 in a wadi near Talataye to present these first French Crosses for Military Valor to my Africans, with their feet in the sand out in the field. I gave up on the idea, so as not to put my units deployed in this area at risk. Even though the situation has improved, it is still dangerous out there.

At 7 am, in front of the tower, we took the first photo for ASM—the Clermont-Ferrand rugby club—with the staff of the 3rd and the units of the 92nd, all stationed in Clermont-Ferrand: a nod to our region and to this team sport which corresponds so well to the team spirit that we advocate. It is now 8 am. The units stand at attention at the edge of the runway in front of the control tower, between the helicopters and CAT 2's AIFVs. They include the brigade staff, the Gauls from the 92nd, the combat engineers from the 31st, the artillerymen from the 68th, the operational LU detached to the Malians, but also the HU pilots and mechanics, and the logisticians from the logistics battalion. Nearly 600 men, pretty much everyone who is not on guard duty and getting ready to leave for Bamako or Dakar. The Malian and African military authorities are here, lined up, with Denis in the center. Veterans from Gao who fought in Indochina and Algeria have taken their place in the ranks. They proudly wear their old ribbons and medals.

The ceremony is simple and follows military protocol: a review of the troops, a reading, the presentation of medals to their recipients, and the departure of authorities as they are saluted by the commanding officer, Colonel Bert. The Greater Gao fighters are lined up by company, in blocks of 150 men. They raise their heads and I take the time to look them all in the eye column by column from the first row to the last. The veterans in their traditional, white, loose-fitting clothing stand upright in front of their chairs, some leaning on their canes. They look like warriors and salute without hesitation.

The agenda is an opportunity to recall the sacrifice of the liberators, to make the link between the Africans of 1945 and those of today, also liberators, and to honor the first decorated. Accompanied by Denis and Bert, we pin the precious red and white ribbon crosses on the breasts of Doro's fighters, those of CAT 2 and the Operational Liaison Unit (OLU),

men of all ranks: officers, captains, company commanders, non-commissioned officers, section chiefs, group leaders, chief corporals, and brave young corporals. This decoration is reserved for those who came under fire and were put in harm's way. All receive it with emotion, in silence. The ceremony is over and the groups take the opportunity to capture the moment with a picture of the decorated veterans, holding the large fabric pennant of the brigade and the colors of their units. Drinks are served in tents to congratulate the decorated, to highlight the role played by Denis, in command during Operation Doro, Bert and Lieutenant Colonel Christophe, at the head of his OLU, and to thank our Malian and African hosts for their presence and their trust. A page has just been turned. We salute the veterans of French Sudan. Their fidelity reminds me of those I invited on November 11, 2005, in our little camp in Man in the north of Ivory Coast. They too had fought under the French flag and, over the course of a meal, they felt transported to the mess hall of yesteryear, with all the young faces and shared codes. These veterans are part of our history. Paying tribute to them is a duty, as it is in France. These veterans also had "a certain idea of France," like the two WWI veterans, the Solunacs Panic and Cirkovic, whom I met in their small villages in Serbia, 30 years earlier, in full dress to celebrate the liberation of their country by France.

By 10 am, the heat is in full effect, hovering around 120 °F. Mini tornadoes several feet high appear at the edges of the runway and pass between the trembling Pumas. Some of the mechanics are caught by surprise by the gusts of wind and cling to the cabin from the top of their ladder to avoid being thrown several feet through the air.

Today's field ration has a package of lasagna in it. Three days earlier, I was talking with soldiers from the 92nd, in their overheated meeting tent, asking them what they would do first, when they got back to France. A corporal replied with a smile: "The basic menu of a shopping center cafeteria: tomatoes, steak, and fries with a salad and two scoops of ice cream." It is only a matter of days, now.

The area is quiet. The officers of the 6th Brigade, who have just arrived, take up their positions as understudies for those of the 3rd, who are preparing to leave. They have gone without transition from a temperate climate to Sahelian heat under the large hangar.

I have prepared my briefings and checked the program for the next three days to make sure I show my replacement the essential: Gao, Tessalit, and Kidal. I know that once he is in charge, it will be harder for him to get away from the CP. Besides that, all I have left to do is get my own

affairs in order. My duffle bag was put in a sea container three days earlier, along with everyone else's. It will arrive a month after our return. I still have to pack my second bag and my satchel, clean my room and set up a second canvas cot for Laurent. The small window is half obstructed by a piece of camouflaged parachute, cut out in Timbuktu. I unhook it from the wall to roll up everything I'll bring back from Mali: my two canes and the Tuareg sword, René Caillié's stone, an onion from the Ametettai, three black stones from the Adrar, sand from Araouane, and Dacko's leather pen holder. I also remove the embroidery I was given by the liberated Malians—"Timbuktu is free, thanks to General Barrera"—from my mosquito net where it has been gathering dust for more than three months.

At 7 pm, the relief Transall lands. I welcome General Kolodjez, commander of the 6th Brigade stationed in Nîmes, whose executive officer, Colonel Hubert, already arrived a few days earlier. The three of us were together in Aix, 35 years ago, and we share many good memories.

Thursday, May 9 to Saturday, May 11

Instructions handoff between generals

These three days will be spent handing off instructions, continuing to monitor the situation, visiting the three bases (Gao, Tessalit, and Kidal), and giving the final instructions to the brigade's remaining units, before they rotate out. Three days go by very quickly, when the incoming team is legitimately in a hurry to take over and the outgoing team is trying hard not to forget anything.

I am up early on the morning of the 9th. At 6 am, the base's lieutenants, mainly from CAT 2 "*pick me up at the office for a tour of the base in a TRM 10000 logistics truck (Tessalit nostalgia), then for coffee at the base of the tower. I tell them about the role of a lieutenant, how lucky they are—how lucky we are—to be here and to have "opened" this theater*," of this generation that will have crossed Africa and fought this war.

A pleasant moment among officers. I still feel like a lieutenant, but I'm getting older, I'm maturing, and the look on others' faces is becoming more and more respectful, and therefore distant. You have to accept it, but not take yourself too seriously and know when to play the role of a curious, insolent lieutenant. We are all mortal.

We spend the morning in Gao to meet with the civilian authorities, before an afternoon dedicated to oral instructions. In the evening, I will meet with the Seahorse Squadron, the one from Timbuktu. They have smiles on their proud Porpoise faces. In a month, they will be back in Angoulême.

My final stop is with the Communications Company. In the tent, a large photo of Mont-Dore is still hanging on the wall. The company signed a twinning agreement with Mont-Dore several months ago. The mayor, Jean-François Dubourg, and his municipal team rose to the occasion. This twinning will be strengthened by strong bonds of friendship and loyalty. Before leaving Auvergne, I will meet with these elected officials to thank them for their unwavering support.

Friday, May 10

Day of reconnaissance in the North

Up at 3 am and, as usual, I spend some time chatting with the night shift staff, over a cup of coffee, wearing fatigues, sneakers, and sweatshirt with my towel and toiletry kit in hand. We discuss incidents at each of the posts and we exchange our assessments of the situation regarding the enemy and what they are still capable of doing, on life in the camp, and what could be improved.

At 7 am, we take off for Tessalit. The Roosters Squadron from the Mar Tnk Inf Rgt has handed over its armored vehicles to a Foreign Legion squadron from the 6th. They are waiting to return to Gao and Bamako by Transall. My detachment commander welcomes us in my old CP. The Chadian general has taken up quarters 300 yards further on, in the former bivouac area of Colonel Desmeulles' CAT 4. I will pay him a visit. He was one of the four Chadian generals I met in eastern Ametettai on the evening of February 24th. It is nice to see each other again. He is watching the television and offers us cold drinks, which he pulls out of a refrigerator. A soldier brings a large basket of fruit containing oranges and bunches of grapes. His supply chain is clearly better than ours. He explains to me that he relies on local traders who get their produce in Algeria. The Chadian contingent has evacuated Kidal and Aguelhok and the units are waiting in the camp, without knowing when they will return, which worries them. Idleness is not recommended for a troop in the field. We reach Kidal by flying over the Tighaghar at 3,000 feet. The door is open. I follow the contours of the valleys that cut the massif into pieces. We destroyed "*the dungeon and beat the enemy in its sanctuary, but this central massif in the Sahel contains water. We have to watch it closely and control it; otherwise there is no doubt that they will come back*." At this altitude, it is almost 60 °F cooler, and we appreciate the temporary air-conditioning. After going around the base, I take a few minutes to say hello to my Bisons, tell them about next month's planned return and urge them more than ever to remain vigilant until the end. They will hold the outpost until they are rotated out.

Back in Gao, at the evening press briefing in the hangar, I now see more new faces than familiar ones. A suicide bomber tried unsuccessfully to blow himself up in Menaka, among a group of Nigerien soldiers, while three others tried to do the same in Gossi, against Malian soldiers. All were shot in time, before the explosion. This is the first time AFISMA has been targeted. We are well into the so-called transition phase, and the enemy continues to harass us.

Saturday, May 11

Last day as commander of the Serval Brigade

In the morning, we attend the traditional meeting of the allies in the tent. Escorted by an AIFV section, we stop in at AFISMA's brand new forward CP to say hello, then we check in with the Malian forces, still waiting for orders in Gao. I spend an hour with the infantrymen of the 92nd who will return before the end of the month. They will soon replaced by a company from the 1st Skirmisher Regiment stationed in Épinal. The two regiments are equipped with AIFVs and know each other well, often crossing paths during expeditionary operations. They are solid, tough regiments. Gauls and skirmishers were together in Mitrovica in 2000, when I was leading the operations of the mechanized battalion in town. Captain du Gardin, efficient and adored by his skirmishers, whom I was then in contact with, now commands the regiment, and I am not worried about the operational readiness of the company he will send to Gao. The transfer of authority will take place at the end of the 7 pm situation update. "*The sand is running through our fingers and the end is near. We knew it would end sooner or later, and we have fulfilled our mission.*"

The situation update begins. I sit down in front of the large map showing the units. The new staff leaders from the 6th present the update. Laurent is on my right. In a few moments, he will be in charge. A storm suddenly breaks and the speakers' explanations become more and more inaudible. Part of the sheet metal roofing starts banging violently. It is the beginning of the rainy season. The skies of Mali bid us farewell.

The new chief of staff brings his CP to attention amidst the sound of clanging sheet metal and wind. I shake hands with Laurent. Good luck and good luck to the 6th with its mission. The new CP applauds the departing team from the 3rd. I salute them all.

I step out of the TOC. On my way out, I pass by my Catalan chief warrant officer and his chief corporal from Marseilles, standing in a corner. I also shake their hands, our soldiers working in the shadows are the archi-

tects of victory. It is thanks to them that our army holds up and wins its battles. "*Dinner in the middle of a storm, lots of wind, sand and noise.*" I have dinner with Denis, Rémi, and my inner circle, facing the runway. The pressure is dropping. We are no longer responsible and the Transall will depart tomorrow at dawn. Rémi is also relieved. He will no longer have to prepare the evening summary for me for the daily report. He has put away his laptop and is waiting for our return home, thinking about his family.

Sunday, May 12

Back to Bamako

Many tents were knocked down by the wind, but no one was injured. We take off at 7 am, before the heat sets in, which allows us to carry more weight. I leave a large contingent of Africans under the command of the 6th who are protecting our outposts and will be carrying out the first missions for the new team. Most of these units from my five African regiments will be returning in the coming weeks. So I am not totally at ease but will be on June 26th, the day the last combat engineers from the 31st return home. The doors of the Transall open. Amused, I remember leaving Abéché nine years earlier. In the same configuration, I had seen Arnaud K., my first cousin and godson, captain and pilot for the French Air Force, step off the plane. Surprised as we were, we embraced each other warmly, which had the effect of surprising my 400 infantrymen from the 16th. An infantry colonel embracing a captain was unprecedented. We burst out laughing when we saw them standing still and, raising Arnaud's arm, I shouted to them, "Meet my godson, the best Transall pilot there is!" which provoked an uproar of laughter. I don't think I said it well enough. On final approach to the runway in N'Djamena, there was an engine failure and I discovered there and then a professional and trained team that knew how to work together. This time Arnaud is not here!

Denis and I sit on the cockpit bench, at the front of the Transall, and we watch as Gao disappears. It is time for the debriefing: four months of operations, a country liberated, several hundred terrorists out of commission, no losses from friendly fire or accidents, no collateral losses among civilians, but the brigade paid the price of these successes: four killed in action and many wounded. Fortunately, all of the wounded were saved.

The highlights from this stopover in Bamako will be my reunion with Grégoire, and in the evening with General Dembélé, whom I am pleased to see again. Bamako is not Gao or Tessalit. It is not Saigon either, but, on the base, around the airport, support has been organized. We rediscover the impersonal lines of a buffet restaurant, fresh food and vegetables from the

South, ice cream, and meals prepared by the army commissary. However, we do not envy our colleagues in Bamako. We are simply in a hurry to reach Paphos and France, our families and friends.

Monday, May 13

Departure day

Up early, with a "*knockout onset of stomach flu*." Too much fresh produce and meat all at once! The flight is scheduled for the evening. We meet again with Grégoire, who accompanies us to the airport. Surrounded by the CP staff, we offer him a statuette representing the Victory of Constantine. I say goodbye to a good friend before getting into the government DC 10, accustomed to staff rotations between theaters of operation and mainland France.

Like all military wives, mine managed to find a place to live, like a true nomad. School enrollment is not looking good. "*We will have to return to the realities of everyday life, to the next move, to find balance again."* She does not complain. I have always managed to be present when we've had to move and when the children were born, something which is definitely rare for the military! I take out my little notebook and my ballpoint pen. They have been following me everywhere since January. I write: "*This operation is over. It has been nearly four months of non-stop operations at a frantic pace. I never would have imagined it when thinking about our Guepard QRF duty. Luck and fate. My men and my staff have made me proud. I return exhausted, looking thin and scrawny, with dehydrated hands, troubled intestines, and tendinitis, but these bones are sturdy. See my family, start thinking about the future, and then it's time to leave again. Two more months in command of the 3rd, my beautiful, tri-crescent brigade.*"

Tuesday, May 14 to Friday, May 17

Paphos stopover

We land in Cyprus at 5 am. We grab our bags, board the vehicles, and arrive at the hotel that has welcomed all of our troops on their way home. This stopover is reserved for difficult theaters, and some have already been here in the past. On arrival, a select group of commanders from the regiments welcome us in lobby. They give us the keys to our rooms and explain the program for the coming days. The hotel is located by the sea. It has bars, swimming pools, gyms, and large dining rooms with everything you could want. We share it with foreign tourists who have their own activities. Everyone is given a colored T-shirt with the hotel's name on it, as sports-

wear is required for the stay. The program is well planned. Each soldier is even entitled to a 20-minute massage and relaxation sessions, carried out by a sports NCO who specializes in recovery. He confides in me that he is often disappointed by the outcome of these sessions. After a few minutes of lying with their backs on the ground, the groups tend to fall asleep! He tells me that he has noticed a big difference between those returning from Afghanistan and those from Mali, two different but harsh theaters. For him, the former were mostly mentally tired, the latter more physically tired. For all of them, these three days will be appreciated, the sign of our country's recognition for their service, after an intense period of risk and danger, a time to decompress and avoid an abrupt transition "*from the war to home*." We all undergo individual and group interviews with specialists from the army's psychological support and intervention cell, who are responsible for listening, helping, and detecting "invisible wounds." These sessions are essential for sections to evacuate certain memories, sublimate fears or images of death, and prepare for their return to a normal world. There are also sessions—which are always popular—about the return to home and the risks of an experience "gap" within the family. In three days, everyone finds the comforts of Western life: a bed, sheets, balanced food, no insecurity, telephone networks and TV shows, and a carefree program with a lot of time for sleeping. The chaplain listens to and accompanies any man who seeks his aide—believers or agnostics.

I take advantage of these three days to finish the end-of-mission report with Denis and Rémi, sitting at a table facing the sea. The weather is not very nice, but I find the time needed to prepare my next meetings with the military authorities, to share some moments of relaxation and discussions with my Africans and those who will soon return to their brigade, the Roosters from the 9th.

Friday, May 17

Return to France

We leave Paphos at night and land in Nantes late in the morning, the closest airport to the largest group, the squadron from Poitiers. The next flights will land in Paris, Clermont, and Lyon. My driver Marie-Jo, who came back a few days earlier, got my official car—a Peugeot 308—so we could drive straight back to Clermont-Ferrand, followed by the staff buses. Everyone returns to their base, their family, as they do every time they come back from an operation. The climate is pleasant in Nantes. I put my bags in the trunk and am about to send a text message to let my family know I'm almost home when I feel someone's hand on my shoulder. War-

rant Officer Stéphane is standing there with his satchel all alone. He wanted to salute me before getting on his bus to go back to his base. He is a fine soldier, the last one I shook hands with on February 26th at the CAT 3 CP, the day before the attack on the Ametettai, knowing that he would have a decisive role, which he assumed perfectly. Words are useless, a gesture is enough. We are equally moved. As I shake his hand for a long time, I know I am saluting one of those leaders who did not tolerate the enemy, who drove their men and led them to victory. With this gesture, I saluted the 4,000 men of the Serval Brigade and turned one of the most intense pages of my history as an officer.

Epilogue

The July 14th parade of 2013 has just ended, the last act of this adventure. Behind our African brothers in arms, and then our French flags, we saluted the head of the armed forces under the applause of the people of Paris. Before going back to Clermont-Ferrand and the moving boxes, I stopped with my family in a fast-food restaurant in the Paris suburbs, wearing a sandy suit, the Foreign Legion's honorary corporal's stripe on my sleeve, the decorations on my chest, the Malian National Order around my neck, without taking the time to change. Two tattooed truck drivers question my children and approach. They were not on the Champs-Elysée, but they understood where I came from and, almost shyly, they came to congratulate me on this campaign. "We followed you. We are proud of our army. You did a great job. Tell that to your soldiers." The two men walked away toward their trucks and their hard lives. It is also for them that we went to Mali.

The months go by. The Monsabert Brigade is decorated with the French Cross for Military Valor, as are the staff of the 11th Airborne Brigade and the engaged regiments. Most of the Serval soldiers are already going back to expeditionary operations: Warrant Officer Stéphane to Ivory Coast, Cristian to Mali on two occasions, the men of the 3rd Brigade to Bamako, then to Baghdad, and those of the 11th Brigade to N'Djamena as the core part of Operation Barkhane, which succeeded Serval in the entire Sahelian zone. Some are engaged in Sangaris, a demanding mission in the Central African Republic. Operations never stop. Obscurantism continues and our army is helping to contain it on the fringes of Europe, in the East and in the South, in close cooperation with our African and eastern allies.

End of December 2014, it is raining on the Breton moors of Coëtquidan. I just finished a conference on communication in front of the cohorts from five officer schools. Questions quickly drifted about operations, the role of the leader, values, the fundamentals of command, and cohesion, the essence of our military profession. As I look at these 600 young officers, the next generation, I realize how far we have come, how strong our training schools are, how much faith our men have in serving the nation, how much the world has changed, and how important principles, exercises, and moral strength are. They too will have to fight. In this dangerous and unpredictable world, peace is won by the strength of the sword and at the cost of blood. Victory is learned at school. For decades, the motto of Saint-Cyr has been written at the entrance to the camp: "They learn to win." As I walk

to the Rennes train station, I lose sight of the school, but remain certain that it is a key to our success, the link between all generations of officers.

February 2015. After Mali, it was Paris that was attacked by jihadists, making those who had their doubts realize that we are indeed at war and that this fight does not only concern Africans. Night falls on the Champ-de-Mars in front of the Military Academy. Yesterday, France paid tribute to our nine air force colleagues who were killed by a fighter jet on the runway in Albacete. Among them was Captain Kocher, a navigator who flew the Mirage 2000, the "guardian angel" of the Serval Brigade. I had congratulated her on her third citation, awarded in the courtyard of the Invalides. I remember her smile, like the stricken faces of the courageous widows of our killed soldiers: Pauline, Nathalie, and their families.

I pass a group of soldiers carrying weapons at the foot of the equestrian statue of Joffre, the liberator of Timbuktu. They are Gauls from CAT 2 and the 92nd Inf Rgt. They were in Gao, Talataye, and Imenas. We meet again two years later. Since the January attacks, they have been keeping a constant watch on the soil of our country. "Sir, the people appreciate what we've done. They understand that we are defending them, even if they don't know what we did in Mali." I am reminded of a quote by Joffre, after the victory of the Marne: "I do not know who won this battle, but I know who could have lost it." I look at them and I am certain that this victory in Mali was theirs, that of the eternal French soldier, courageous and generous, always ready to defend his country, today as in 1914.

I dedicate this book to those who have fallen, to those who serve daily, to those whom I have had the honor of commanding for 30 years, to those who have waited for them to return and who mourn them.

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Lexicon

Africans...Nickname for soldiers from the 3rd Brigade, also called the Monsabert Brigade

LAW .....Light anti-armor weapon

AFH .....Advanced field hospital

AK 47..... Avtomat Kalachnikova, Kalashnikov automatic rifle, model 47. 7.62mm assault rifle, the most widely used in the world

MA.....Military assistant

AMX-10RC..... Light tank armed with a 105mm cannon. Atelier [workshop] Issy-les-Moulineaux, class 10, Roues Canon [cannon wheels].

AQIM .....Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AT4 CS ..... 84 mm shoulder-fired missile, also called LAW, see LAW

Auvergne.....Traditional name for the 92nd Infantry Regiment and, by extension, for the battalion formed in Mali by this regiment, CAT 2.

Log Bn.....Logistics battalion

LGB.....Laser-guided bomb, see GBU

Bigors ..... Traditional nickname for marine artillerymen. Originating from “biges hors,” the order before the scuttles were opened and the cannons fired, when the French navy used sailing vessels.

Bisons ..Traditional nickname for infantrymen from the 126th Infantry Regiment

MB..... Mechanized brigade

BMP.....Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty, infantry fighting vehicle. Tracked vehicle of Soviet origin, designed for transporting and supporting mechanized infantry.

AB..... Airborne brigade

PCS.....Projection and command ship

BIB..... Brigade intelligence battery

BRDM-2 Boyevaya Razvedyvatelnaya Dozornaya Mashina, combat and reconnaissance vehicle. Soviet-designed wheeled 14.5mm machine gun.

Caesar.....Truck equipped with a 155mm howitzer, 25 mile range

CSTC.....Command and Supply Train Company

CSC.....Combat Support Company

CSAS ..... Chief of Staff of the Armies

CSA.....Chief of Staff of the Army

Camels..... Nickname for Porpoises from the 2nd Mar Inf Rgt

CCGF .....Command Center for Ground Forces

AMSC..... Advanced Military Studies School

TOC.....Tactical operations center

BC..... Brigade commander

Roosters.....Nickname for Porpoises from the 3rd Squadron of the Mar Tnk Inf Rgt

SOC ..... Special operations commander

OCCC..... Strategic Operations Command and Control Center in Paris

CrocosNickname for Porpoises from the 3rd Squadron of the 1st Mar Inf Rgt

AID .....Algerian Infantry Division

DICD ..... Defense information and communication delegation

LU ..... Liaison unit

IED .....Improvised explosive device

GSOA ..... General staff of the armies

EUTM..... European Union Training Mission in Mali

Eryx.....Infantry anti-tank missile, half-mile range.

Its name comes from a desert sand snake known for its agility.

MAF .....Malian armed forces

FAMAS..... Assault rifle, Saint-Étienne weapons manufacture; 5.56 mm rifle.

CAFIM .....Chadian armed forces intervening in Mali

FOB .....Forward operating base. Secure and fortified base of operations.

SOS .....
...Specialized operational search. Combined arms unit that implements specific procedures and equipment in a hostile environment.

SF ..... Special forces

G08 ..... Name of the 11th Airborne Brigade's forward command post

AJG.....
Armed jihadist groups, also
known as ATG: armed terrorist groups

HU.....Helicopter unit

Gauls.....Nickname for soldiers from the 92nd Infantry Regiment

GBU-12.....Guided Bomb Unit. Laser-guided bombs (see LGB), modifies its trajectory on its own to hit the target "painted" by the laser.

PCU .....Paratrooper commando unit

Grumblers..Nickname for soldiers from the 1st Company of the 92nd Infantry Regiment

CAT ..... Combined arms team

Guepard .....the army's standing quick reaction force (QRF)

Seahorses.....Nickname for soldiers from the Engagement Support Squadron of the 1st Mar Inf Rgt.

IED ..... Improvised explosive device

Katibas ..... Names of rebel units (equivalent in size to a company, i.e 140 soldiers)

Porpoises .....Nickname for soldiers from the marine infantry

MINUSMA.....Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

AFISMA.....African-led International Support Mission to Mali

HOT.....High subsonic, Optical, remote-guided, Tube-launched. Long-range anti-tank missile (up to 2.5 miles), optical guidance and subsonic speed.

NMLA .....National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad

MUJWA ..... Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa

EO..... Expeditionary operations

CP ..... Command post

FCP.....Forward command post, the name of the brigade's forward CP

Arty Rgt .....Artillery regiment

Afr Arty Rgt..... African Artillery Regiment

Mar Arty Rgt..... Marine artillery regiment

Raptors..... Nickname for paratroopers from the 1st PCR and for infantrymen from the 4th Company of the 92nd Inf Rgt

PCR .....Parachute Chasseur [light infantry] Regiment

Foreign Legion Cvl Rgt .....Foreign Legion cavalry regiment

Foreign Legion Inf Rgt .....Foreign Legion infantry regiment

Intel.....Intelligence

Foreign Legion Para Rgt..... Foreign Legion paratrooper regiment

Eng Rgt .....Engineer regiment

Para Eng Rgt .....Parachute engineer regiment

Huss Rgt..... Hussar [light cavalry] Regiment

Cmb Hel Rgt.....Combat helicopter regiment

SOHR.....Special operations helicopter regiment

Para Huss Rgt.....Parachute hussar [light cavalry] regiment

Inf Rgt.....Infantry regiment

Colonial Inf Rgt.....Colonial infantry regiment

Mar Tnk Inf Rgt..... Marine tank infantry regiment

Mar Inf Rgt..... Marine infantry regiment

Comm Rgt or Trs Rgt.....Communications regiment or transportation regiment

APC..... Armored personnel carrier

AIFV.....Armored infantry fighting vehicle

LAV..... Light armored vehicle

MV.....Military valor (nickname of the cross of the same name)

Translator's Note

Military organizations worldwide are known for their fondness of acronyms, and this book is no exception. From weapons and formations to ranks and academies, key terms and frequently used concepts are often abbreviated into acronyms. To make the reading experience smoother, I have translated these acronyms into English, with their original French forms listed in the lexicon at the end of the book for reference.

—John di Rico, Translator

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In January 2013, Northern Mali was occupied by a coalition of terrorist groups threatening Bamako and Southern Mali. French President François Hollande launched Operation Serval, deploying some 5,000 troops on short notice. General Bernard Barrera, head of the land component forces, kept an occupational diary, presented here in the English language for the first time. General Barrera's reflections in real time highlight pure talent and profound humanity when encountering irregular warfare, recounting a broad spectrum of difficulties as they unfold.

After Saint Cyr, Bernard Barrera served in the Cold War, the Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo) and Africa (Chad, Côte d'Ivoire). Brigadier General in 2011, he joined Mali at short notice in January 2013 to command the Serval Brigade. He left the army in 2020 as General, Inspector General of the Army.

With a foreword by Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, US Army, Retired and author of *Dereliction of Duty*, *Battlegrounds*, and *At War with Ourselves*.

With a foreword by Général Henri Bentégeat, former Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces.

Translated into English by Mr. John di Rico.

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